

Hedge Schools and Others: A Note on Schools in the Parish of Kilmore and Ballinacclough in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

Cáit Logue

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there were in effect two parallel school systems in operation in Ireland, one was largely Protestant and backed by government grants and voluntary societies, the other was Catholic and self-supporting and indeed (until 1829) technically illegal.

An act passed in the seventh year of the reign of William III (i.e. William of Orange) was the basis for what became known as the penal laws against Catholic education. This act stated that no person of the popish religion should publicly teach school under a penalty of a fine of £20 and three months imprisonment. These laws were enforced – as evidenced by the indictments of Catholic lay teachers before a Limerick Grand Jury 1711 to 1722.¹ Still, some Catholic teachers continued to operate. A return made by Thomas Hempsworth, rector, to the inquiry into the state of popery in 1731, states that ‘in the Parish of Kilmore there is one Popish Philosophy master and one Latin and English master.’² It is not known if these masters were prosecuted or allowed to continue. It is remarkable that two such masters should exist in a rural parish at that time when the number quoted for the whole diocese of Killaloe was twenty, while in the town of Nenagh it was reported that there were several itinerant schoolmasters ‘but none have settled.’³

The main consequence of the penal laws relating to education was the creation of what came to be known as the hedge school system. These were private pay schools that were set up by individuals and held wherever shelter could be found, in cabins, barns or even at the back of a hedge. In a return made in 1808 there are four schools listed for the Parish of Kilmore and three of them were probably hedge schools. (This record was prepared by the Vicars of the several parishes or parish unions).⁴

John MacNamara, a Roman Catholic, had 10 Protestant and 40 Catholic pupils;

Matthew Kenny, a Roman Catholic, had 13 Catholic pupils;

Thomas Cusack, a Roman Catholic, had 52 Catholic pupils.

We have no information about the location of these schools. The fourth school was taught by Thomas de Vey, a Protestant, who had forty Protestant pupils.

The most comprehensive account of the hedge schools available from official sources is contained in the Parochial Returns 1824. These returns were made (separately) by the Catholic and Protestant clergy of each parish to the Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry 1824. The Report of the Commissioners (1826) gives:

- the exact location (town land) of each school;
- the name, religion, and income of the master or mistress;
- a description of the schoolhouse and an estimate of its cost;
- the number of pupils attending the school and whether they were Catholic or Protestant, male or female.

The Report also states whether the school was free or fee paying and whether the Scriptures were read. (In some schools the Authorised Version of the Scriptures was read and in others the Douai or Catholic version was used.) The vast majority of the hedge schools were co-educational, with the boys in the majority and many were interdenominational as well.

In Kilmore parish in 1824 all the hedge school teachers were Catholics. All the schools were fee paying and all except one were held in premises described as 'thatched cottages'. No estimate is given of the cost of any of these cottages. The average cost of schoolhouses in adjacent parishes was about £5. The schools were listed as follows:

Thomas Burke taught in the village of the Silvermines and earned about £12 per annum. His school was in a 'hired house in the village' and was attended by 39 Catholic and 4 Protestant pupils, 25 boys and 18 girls.

Patrick Kelly taught at Mucklin. His income was from £12 to £15 per annum and his school was attended by 58 Catholics and 2 Protestant pupils, 40 boys and 20 girls.

Patrick Gleeson's school was at Kyltrome. His annual income was from £14 to £16. All 70 pupils attending this school were Catholics and consisted of 39 boys and 31 girls.

John O'Reilly taught at Lisheen. His annual income was from £10 to £12. The attendance at his school was made up of 44 Catholic and 10 Protestant pupils, 40 boys and 14 girls. This was the only hedge school in the parish of Kilmore in which the scriptures (Authorised Version) were read.

Catherine Marshall taught at Derry. Her annual income was from £5 to £6 and was derived from 30 Catholic pupils, 15 boys and 15 girls.

Winifred Farrell also earned from £5 to £6 at Ballycahill. Her school was attended by 20 Catholic pupils, 16 boys and 4 girls.

In Ballinacough parish there was only one independent day school. It can hardly be described as a hedge school at all, as it was held in the parish chapel. The teacher was Patrick Butler and his income was about £8 a year. His fees must have been very low as he had seventy-four Catholic pupils, forty boys and thirty-four girls.

Another commission set up to investigate education issued its report in 1835. This was the Commission of Public Instruction. The Report of this commission lists the schools in each diocese, but it does not give the exact location of the school, only the parish, nor does it refer to the religion of the teachers or pupils. Information given includes the sources of support, the number of pupils, male and female, whether the numbers were increasing, decreasing or stationary, and the kind of instruction given. According to this report, none

of the hedge schools that existed in the Parish of Kilmore in 1824 survived until 1835.

There were only three independent pay schools (hedge schools) listed for that parish and they were:

Evening School, kept by John McDonnell established 9th December 1834. It was attended by 18 pupils, 10 males and 8 females and the numbers were increasing. The subjects taught were Reading, Writing and Arithmetic and the school was supported by 'monthly payments of children'.

Day school kept by Edward Ford. The attendance at this school was 'About 50, when open' and the numbers were diminishing. There is no information as to whether the pupils were male or female. Reading, Writing and Arithmetic were taught and the school was supported by 'small payments of children'.

Day and Evening School kept by Michael Garry. This school had been established 6 months and the numbers were increasing. The attendance was 27 males and 19 females. The Day scholars numbered 12 males and 4 females while the Evening Scholars consisted of 15 male and 15 females, making a total of 46. This school was also supported by 'small monthly payments of children'. Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Geometry and Grammar were taught.

Two independent day schools were listed for the parish of Ballynaclogh in 1835:

Patrick Farrell Noble taught in the chapel. His school was attended by 46 pupils, 42 male and 4 female. It had been established in June 1833 and the numbers were increasing. Small payments of the children were the sole support of this school and the subjects taught were Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Grammar, Book-keeping, Geometry and Algebra. (As we have seen there had been a school in the chapel in 1824 but it must have been discontinued sometime before 1835.)

John Costelloe kept a Day and Evening School attended by 46 pupils, 42 males and 4 females. This school had been established 3 months and was supported by small monthly payments of the children. The numbers were increasing. Writing and English grammar were the subjects taught.

We can see that many of the independent schools existing in 1835 were of very recent origin. We have no information as to why all the schools noted by the 1824 commission disappeared. Of course by 1835 the state supported national school system had been set up but as yet no school had been established under that system in either Kilmore or Ballinaclogh

Parochial Schools

The Commissioners of Education Inquiry (1824) stated 'to what extent the Acts of Henry VIII and Elizabeth had at any time been complied with cannot now be ascertained'.⁵ The idea of founding parochial schools was first introduced in the reign of Henry VIII but the Act passed in the twenty eighth year of his reign directing the rectors of each parish to give monetary support (generally thought to be about £2 annually) to a schoolmaster, appears to have remained ineffective until the eighteenth century. The Union of Kilmore does not seem to have had a parochial school in the first half of the 19th century.

It is not clear when the parochial school in Ballinaclogh was founded, as that parish was not mentioned in the 1808 Returns. But in 1824 the schoolhouse (of the parochial school) was described as 'a very good slated house'. It cost about £80 to build, and the Association for Discouraging Vice had contributed £25. This was a pay-school and the teacher was

Daniel Patrick whose income was £11 per annum. The attendance numbered only eight pupils, three male and five female. The teacher received £2 per annum from the incumbent, 'who contributed with others to the cost of the schoolhouse'. The building was most likely a new one in 1824. The Authorised Version of the Scriptures was read.

Daniel Patrick was still teaching in this school in 1835. The numbers had risen to thirty-six, eighteen boys and eighteen girls but were said to be 'diminishing'. The subjects taught were 'Reading, Writing, Arithmetic Bookkeeping and Needlework to the girls'. It is not clear how the needlework was taught. Sources of support are given as 'An acre of land and an annual sum of £5 from Dean Head'. This was a pay school in 1824 but there is no reference to payment in the 1835 report.

Ballinaclogh Parochial School was one of those examined by the Endowed School Commission in 1856. The inspector reported that the course of instruction was meant to include reading, writing, English grammar, geography and arithmetic with scripture and church catechism to 'church children' (i.e. members of the Established Church). The school had deteriorated considerably since 1835. The report states 'There were only two pupils present when I visited the school, they were both very young girls and their knowledge was very elementary. They could read pretty well and could do a sum in short division but knew scarcely anything of Geography or English Grammar. The amount of secular instruction given in this school is very small. Dean Head, the Rector of the Parish, seems to pay great attention to the religious instruction'.⁶ We do not know the ages of the pupils but the inspector of the Commission seems to have expected a high standard. Neither geography nor grammar is listed among the subjects taught in 1835. However they are listed in the original endowment made by the Association for Discountenancing Vice and John Bayly on 24th June 1822.

Schools of the Bible Societies

Many voluntary groups (connected to Bible Societies) supported schools (mostly Protestant) in Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century. One of the oldest of the bible societies was the Association for Discountenancing Vice. It was founded in Capel Street, Dublin in 1792. It was supported and managed by clergy of the Established Church and gave assistance to parochial schools. We have already seen that the society contributed £25 to the cost of the building of the parochial school in Ballinaclogh in 1822.

The Kildare Place Society was the most important of the voluntary education societies in Ireland at this time. Founded in 1811, it was managed by a committee of gentlemen of different denominations and aimed at introducing a system of education acceptable to all. Catechisms and books of religious knowledge were to be excluded. But 'the Bible or Testament without note or comment should be read by all scholars who had attained a suitable proficiency in Reading'.⁷

In 1824 the Kildare Place Society supported one school in Kilmore Parish. This was at Kilboy and had been built by Lord Dunalley at a cost of £150. Lord Dunalley gave £22-15s-0p per annum to the master, Peter Brown. He and Mrs Bowles, both Protestants, taught fifty-eight Catholic and twenty-two Protestant pupils, fifty girls and thirty boys. The school was free to the pupils so it is not clear how Mrs Bowles was paid. The Kildare Place Society paid a gratuity of £5 or £7 per annum. It is not stated if this was paid to the master or to Mrs Bowles. The Authorised Version of the Scriptures was read by the Protestant pupils only.

In 1835 there seem to have been two separate schools at Kilbooy, one being described as 'a female free work school, Elizabeth Bowles, mistress'. At this stage Elizabeth Bowles received an annual salary from Lord Dunalley and taught needlework and straw plaiting to eighty-nine girls. The other school was a 'male free' school taught by Thomas Brown who also received a salary from Lord Dunalley. The amount of the salaries is not stated). This school was attended by fifty to sixty boys 'besides the girls'. From this, it is possible to infer that the girls were taught the general subjects with the boys and went to Elizabeth Bowles for Needlework, though this is not at all certain. Reading, writing and arithmetic were the subjects taught.

National Schools

The Kildare Place Society had been receiving large Government grants since 1815. In 1831 the grants were transferred to the newly established Commission of National Education. The first Commissioners of the National Board, as it was known, were:

Anglicans

The Duke of Leinster (Chairman)
Archbishop Whately of Dublin
Dr Sadleir – Provost of Trinity College

Presbyterians

Rev. James Carlisle
Mr Robert Holmes

Roman Catholics

Archbishop Murray of Dublin
A.R. Blake

The National Board was set up to oversee the introduction of the National School system which was to be interdenominational. Children were to receive combined literary and separate religious instruction. The first national school in the parish of Kilmore was that established in the townland of Bawn in 1837.⁸ An unusual feature was that the application to the National Board for aid was made by lay people. In general, applications were made by a clergyman of one of the Christian denominations e.g. the parish priest or vicar of the parish, occasionally there was a joint application from both clergymen. However William Kennedy, a local farmer, was the applicant in the case of Bawn school. He informed the Board that the schoolhouse was slated and built of stone, lime and mortar and had been provided at his own expense. The building was in a good state of repair but had no windows or chimney. There were no desks or seats except temporary ones, which could accommodate one hundred pupils. The school was supported by the parents who could afford to pay and had been established three weeks at the date of application, April 5th 1837. It was open five days a week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with one hour for dinner. Religious Instruction was given on Saturday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. The attendance was forty-seven boys and thirty-two girls. It was proposed to use the books published by the National Board. The teacher was Patrick Farrell Noble. He was 'not trained in a model school but had learned the system in Nenagh National School'. The 'most unquestionable testimonials of his character and abilities' could be produced. (One presumes that he was the Patrick Farrell Noble who had a school in Ballinacloyh Chapel in 1835 and taught reading, writing, arithmetic, bookkeeping, geometry and algebra.)

The teacher's salary was undetermined at the time of application. 'But parents who can pay, pay a shilling a quarter'. The application was approved by Dean Holmes, rector of Kilmore and by Rev. Edward Magrath, P.P. Shragh.

It was envisaged that the school would be run by a committee composed of:

Rev Edward Magrath,P.P.	Shragh.
William Kennedy	
Nicholas Kennedy	
Cornelius Leahy	Bawn
Patrick Cash	
James Costelloe	Kilriffith
John Gleeson	
Daniel Thumpane	Boultheeny
William Hardy	
Samuel Brindley	Dolla
Mr and Mrs Prittie	Kilmore

As regards other schools in the area, Nenagh national school was two miles distant. There was no other school except Right Hon. Lord Dunalley's Private School which is four miles distant.' There were nine Protestant and thirteen Catholic signatories to this application:

Protestants	Catholics
Dunalley	Edward Magrath P.P.
Gilbert Holmes, Incumbent	William Kennedy
William Prittie	Nicholas Kennedy
John Prittie	Denis Gleeson
Olivia Prittie	John Gleeson
Richard Prittie	Patrick Cash
John Prittie	Michael Kavanagh
Samuel Brindley	Michael Gleeson
William Hardy	James Costelloe
	Michael Hanley
	Thomas Gleeson
	Cornelius Leahy
	Andrew Gleeson

The application was successful and £6 salary was sent for the master, together with 'free stock' (i.e. books and requisites) for seventy-five pupils. £7 was granted towards furnishing (towards an expenditure of £10). Furniture was to consist of the following:

- 8 desks @ 5/- each
- 12 forms, 12 feet long @ 3/4 each
- 1 master's desk @ 10/-
- 1 press for books
- 12 table boards
- 12 porishes (?)

Three windows were to be opened, a door placed to the end of the house and a chimney provided. Evidently the school was established as envisaged and in 1839 the teacher was Michael Sweeney and he was granted a salary of £7 per annum. However in February 1840, an inspector gave a very unfavourable report of the school. Another teacher John Buckley had been appointed and his qualifications were not deemed suitable. Furthermore the inspector had reason to believe that 'he was the instigator of a party of armed men who had compelled the former master, Sweeney, (a much more competent teacher who had resigned and was likely to be reappointed) to promise on pain of death not teach within a circle of three miles of Bawn'. The correspondent (i.e. the applicant who was in touch with the Board) was directed to dismiss Buckley on the grounds of incompetence. The number on roll was then thirty-four boys and twenty-seven girls.

A new teacher Michael Minehan was appointed and the school continued until 31st March 1842 when a directive came from the Board to 'Strike off roll, cancel outstanding grants to furnish and withdraw salary as the schoolhouse is out of repair, a disgrace to the locality and is in a ruinous and dilapidated state'.

Thus ended Bawn national school. The original application for aid was made in 1837, but the grant appears to have been delayed until 1839. It is not clear whether Patrick Farrell Noble taught in Bawn for those two years or when or why he left. Interestingly enough, Slater's Directory for 1846 gives P.Noble as the teacher of a school at 52, Barrack St., Nenagh. It is quite likely that he was the man who taught in Bawn as the surname is unusual in the locality. Also in 1846 a Michael McSweeney had a school in Chapel Lane, Nenagh. He may have been the same as Michael Sweeney who taught in Bawn and was subjected to the intimidation described by the inspector. Both these schools in Nenagh were private and unconnected with the National Board.

The second national school in Kilmore parish was established at the Silvermines. The application was made on May 13th 1840, by Edward Magrath P.P., who requested aid for a teacher's salary and a supply of books. The schoolhouse, which was just completed at the time of application, had been paid for by public subscription and 'was built of the best materials' and the school was already in operation. There were two schoolrooms but they were badly furnished 'seating having been temporarily fitted up'. The average attendance was seventy boys and forty-nine girls and school hours were from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Religious instruction was not given in the school and times for religious instruction would be arranged in accordance with the directions of the board. The teacher was Patrick O'Brien, aged twenty-six years and it was also stated that 'no particular books used at present'.

Patrick Quinlan was the inspector who visited the school and his report makes interesting reading. He noted that it had been built on chapel ground but could be immediately detached from it (buildings on chapel ground were not acceptable to the National Board). The teacher Patrick O'Brien, had received no instruction in a model school. His testimonials from several clergymen were 'very satisfactory'. His literary attainments were 'middling' and his character 'good'. His method of conducting a school was described as 'well trained, very attentive'. There were local funds of £12 towards the teacher's salary and the patron promised to keep the house in repair.

The population of the parish was estimated at about 4,000, about one quarter of whom were of the poorer class. Of that portion of the population likely to send their children to the national school, the inspector stated 'They are generally speaking very

ignorant but very temperate'. The numbers present at the time of inspection were fifty-seven males and thirty-five females. There were ninety-six males and fifty-one females on the books for the previous six months, and the average attendance was seventy males and forty females and the patron expected the numbers to double. Mr Quinlan concluded his report by stating that 'All clergymen in the area concurred in the propriety of applying for aid...and my opinion is that this application should be entertained'. This report is dated Friday 3rd July 1840. A salary of £8 for Patrick O'Brien (from March 1st 1840) and free books for 125 males and seventy-five females were dispatched to the Rev Edward McGrath.

In February 1842, Rev. Edward McGrath applied for a salary for a female teacher. Written in red on the application is the information that Patrick O'Brien third class (i.e. he was graded third class) was in receipt of a salary of £8 and also that a previous application for a salary for a female teacher had been rejected, the numbers being too small. However, this new application stated that the teacher Mary Hannon aged twenty years had been appointed on October 1st. She was educated at Nenagh national school and had testimonials from Rev. Dean Head (rector) and from Rev Edward McGrath P.P. there were no local funds to pay her and some scholars paid a 'mere trifle'. There was a female schoolroom available 16ft. by 29ft. and there were 67 females on the roll. The male teacher was John Ryan. The applicant added a note stating that he had appointed John Ryan in place of Patrick O'Brien deceased, and he hoped to satisfy the Board as to his competence in every respect. It appears that Patrick O'Brien died on December 3rd 1841. The half yearly salary of £4 due on March 31st. was divided, £2 was given to the representatives of Patrick O'Brien and £2 to John Ryan, the new teacher.

As regards Mary Hannon, the inspector Patrick Quinlan gave the following report 'She is studious and attentive and by a little attention to her own improvement she will be fully qualified.....taking into account the state of the locality as regards population, I am of the opinion that by having good teachers both schools will be well attended'.

Mary Hannon was appointed female teacher at a salary of £8 per annum. She continued in the Silvermines until April 1846 when she left to attend a model school. She was later appointed to Borrisokane national school and received a salary of £12 as she had been regraded second class.

In November 1842 it was reported that John Ryan was dismissed and his place taken by Michael Minehan, formerly of Bawn national school. There is some confusion about this appointment as in November 1843 the inspector reported the appointment of John Ryan as teacher and stated that he was incompetent. The manager was requested to appoint a competent teacher as no salary could be paid to John Ryan. The manager notified the appointment of a teacher (unnamed) on November 16th 1843. However in November 1844 the school was reported closed as the teacher had left to attend the training college. This teacher was Edward Conroy. (It seems probable that he was the Edward Conroy who had taught in Nenagh national school since April 1841.)

Silvermines female school was regarded as a separate school. When Mary Hannon left she was replaced by Mary Kennedy who had taught in Borrisoleigh. There were many changes of teacher during the famine years. In 1848 the manager stated that Mary Kennedy had been 'removed' (no reason given) and a teacher named Bridget Leahy appointed. However the Board informed the manager that Bridget Leahy had been dismissed from Garryshane national school and her appointment to the Silvermines could not be sanctioned 'owing to the serious nature of the charge against her'.

Eventually, her appointment was sanctioned on payment of a fine of ten shillings. But also in 1848 Bridget Leahy changed to another school and Hanora Ryan was appointed. However she did not last long as she was 'removed' in February 1849 and Ann Doyle appointed. But in August of that year Ann Doyle resigned and Hanoria Conroy was appointed.

By 1850 both a male and a female school had been established under the National Board at Silvermines. An application was made to the National Board in 1841 for aid towards the building of a schoolhouse in Ballinaclogh. But this was not proceeded with at that time. The applicant Rev Edward McGrath P.P. died in 1850 and it was his successor Rev Joseph McGrath who eventually had the school built in 1852.

It is difficult to ascertain how long the hedge schools lasted after the introduction of the national school system but particularly after the Famine they appear to have been gradually replaced by the official system, which with some changes and reforms has remained with us to the present day.

Sources

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