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VICTORIAN SUNDAY SCHOOLS IN BIRMINGHAM

The Sunday School became one of the great social institutions of the nineteenth century. This article gives a general picture of the development of the Sunday School movement to provide the context for one specific urban example, Birmingham. It looks in turn at the three main types, religious schools for children and young people, adult schools and socialist schools.

The social context and the development of the Sunday School movement

The origins of the Sunday School are uncertain. The activities of Borromeo, Wesley and Ball were recorded well before Raikes's *Gloucester Journal* acted as a catalyst in the late eighteenth century. Laqueur has provided a helpful, recent account of the historical development of the Sunday School.[1]

The aims of early workers in the Sunday School movement have been discussed too. Raikes's long history of involvement in social affairs suggests that his interest was not merely evangelism. Hannah Moore may have been less secular in her motives:

> Writing is not of a nature proper to be taught them, nor would be consistent if it were, for the Sabbath Day... As to the connexion between reading and writing as regularly understood, I discover none that concerns those who depend for their bread on manual labour and not on the pen. The first is necessary to them for learning their religion and filling up their vacant hours and to prevent that vacuity of thought, or mischevious consequence, which ignorance often occasions: the last is not necessary or expedient.[2]

But in 1823 she feared that the Sunday Schools had gone too far and that the poor were being made "scholars and philosophers".

Mrs Trimmer articulated her beliefs clearly and was a prolific writer of materials for use in schools.

> I rejoice in the idea of having been allowed to contribute in some degree, towards rendering the study of scriptures, a regular branch of education... The opposite customs which have of late years prevailed... of either suffering the scriptures to be read by children in a promiscuous manner or totally neglected have, I am persuaded, been the principal cause of the profaneness and libertinism of the age... It is presumptious to suppose that we can educate youth properly without them (the scriptures) and it may justly be considered an irreverent act to make use of his holy word with no further end in view than the improvement of the act of reading.[3]

There is little doubt, though, that the principal objectives of these three pioneers of Sunday Schools lay rather in the field of maintenance of social order than evangelism. They

felt that the "profaneness and libertanism" were the result of people turning away from religion and felt that this trend might be stopped, or at least shifted, if these people could read the scriptures. However, it is quite probable that they did not realise just what a revolutionary work the Bible was. "The first shall be last": "The wolf shall sit down with the lamb": "Beat your ploughshares into swords" and "I come not to bring peace, but the sword" are not exactly texts to gentle the masses.

The close of the eighteenth century heralded significant demographic and economic changes and probably as a consequence of these, but also assisted by activities on the mainland of Europe, the existing political structure began to be weakened. The industrial revolution was attracting labour from agriculture to new industry. Higher wages were frequently to be found in the towns and, although the standard of housing was low, it was also low in the villages. From 1800 the population of England began to rise rapidly.

After 1780 foreign trade began to increase rapidly and the political upheavals of the continent of Europe were feared in Britain. Many new occupations began to develop where the asset of a little reading and writing was required. Amongst these the exporting of manufactured goods was probably the earliest to expand its warehousing and stock control occupations. The development of new jobs requiring skill on the part of the employees probably heralded the start of a shift of emphasis from ascription to achievement.

The Sunday Schools began to provide some alternative form of education to the day schools, which were sporadically located, and the Charity Schools which had a rather more custodial role. There are few records of early Sunday Schools, other than the well documented ones of the pioneers, generally because there was no overall plan or agency for their establishment. If a local demand was anticipated and met by local resources a school might be established. There is little dispute, though, about the demand for instruction. In all cases where records do remain demand seems to have been considerable.

The administrative structure of the Anglican Church in the early nineteenth century was still essentially rural and tied to parish boundaries, largely ignored in the spread of towns. Whilst the Anglican Church had been losing touch with the poor, particularly once they had drifted away from the agricultural villages, the Dissenters had been active and, since Birmingham's historical development had not been influenced to a very significant extent by large land owners and their close association with the parishes, the opportunities for rapid growth of Dissenter organisations were great. The Protestant ethic, whereby man was the master of his own destiny and that by his own efforts and utilizing his own abilities he ought to be able to receive proportionate rewards, prevailed. This view challenged unthinking acceptance of the status quo, but wanted to retain some recognizable elements of the society which existed. Whilst generally the established church supported

the traditional views, increasingly the Dissenters provided more opportunity for social advancement.

Within their own churches the Dissenters could take an active part in matters which affected them. They could participate in debates of a theological nature and would be consulted about matters of fabric and finance. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the emerging new lower middle class, small shopkeepers, traders and independent artisans, wanted to practise their commercial independence within the church. They did not always want decisions made for them on Sunday when they made them for themselves every other day. Nonconformism provided, too, a means of upward social mobility denied elsewhere, but compatible with their increasing economic status. These factors go some way towards explaining the greater preponderance of Dissenter Sunday Schools in Birmingham. It should be noted that parallel to the development of the Sunday Schools, Anglicans and, later, Catholics, were developing day schools. The two were seen by most workers as complementary although when government money first became available for schools in 1833 it is interesting to note that the Baptists did not want to accept any of it. They had been pressing for strictly secular schools, with religious education offered either after normal school hours or on Sunday. They feared that government money in schools would eventually compel them to conform.

Religious Sunday Schools

Whilst there are many records left of nineteenth century Birmingham Sunday Schools, these tend to be dispersed amongst various libraries, church archives and in private hands. It is difficult, therefore, to give an overall picture of the early provision and development of schools in Birmingham.

An early reference exists to a Sunday School at Cannon Street Baptist Church which by 1799 had 1,200 scholars and an account remains of the opening of Heneage Street Baptist Church and its earlier stone-laying in 1838:

> On 1st August a service was held in the Town Hall in celebration of the emancipation of the slaves and attended by 5,000 children. 3,000 of these were from Cannon St., Bond St., Graham St., Newhall St., and Lombard St. Sunday Schools and 2,000 from the Lancastrian schools at Severn St. and Ann St. and the Infants schools at Islington St. and Ann St. After 'a substantial meal of bread and beef they marched to Willis St. (Heneage St. corner) where Joseph Sturge performed the ceremony'.[4]

Although this was essentially a Baptist affair, it does give some indication of the impact which Sunday Schools in Birmingham were having. In the ten years following the stone-laying the school grew to 1,200.

The Birmingham Statistical Society for the improvement of Education provided evidence for the Royal Commission on Employment of Children. The Society's 1838 survey records Birmingham's population as 180,000 and of these

	10,902	attended day or evening school only
	4,141	attended both day and evening school
	12,616	attended Sunday School only
thus	27,659	attended school of some kind or other
BUT	5,835	were under age 5 or over age 15
thus	21,824	pupils were attending some form of school, the Society concluded.

The population abstracts for 1821 and 1831 were used to deduce that a quarter of the population in 1838 consisted of children between the ages of 5 and 15; i.e. 45,000. The Society, therefore, concluded that only 48.5% of the children were actually receiving any instruction within Birmingham. This was compared with figures for other cities. 51.5% of the children in Birmingham were receiving no instruction at all. Four parishes in the City of Westminster recorded 65.9%, Liverpool 52.7%, York 34.7%, Manchester 30.7% and Bury 17.8% of pupils not receiving instruction.[5]

Fifty-six Sunday Schools were recorded in Birmingham with 16,757 scholars having an average attendance of 72.8%. Of these 56 schools all taught reading, 25 writing, 7 arithmetic, 5 geography and grammar and history. Twenty-one of the Sunday Schools had other schools attached in which some scholars received instruction in writing, arithmetic, sewing or a few other subjects deemed of too secular a nature to be taught on the Sabbath. There is an interesting comparison here between Hannah Moore's reasons for not teaching writing, social control, and the mid-Victorian attitude in its secular nature, a theological control.

In his evidence to the Commission's Collector, the Rev. Thomas Moseley, Rector of St Martin's, said that he believed that there were no regular evening schools attached to the established church, although he inferred that they were held from time to time. The Rev. G. S. Bull, minister of St Matthew's Church, said that he regarded Sunday Schools as merely a remedial measure and with the serious defect that they were necessarily restricted to religious subjects. There was agreement between the contributors to the evidence that universal day schools were required and that a connection was observed between the early age of starting work and juvenile vice, notably child prostitution. The collector's report says that he was impressed with the standard of the Sunday Schools.

> On the whole, the Sunday schools in Birmingham rank higher in efficiency than any other place which has been the subject of similar investigation.[6]

In 1864 a Commission investigated the metal trades and, although by this time Birmingham's population had risen to 300,000 still no Medical Officer of Health had been appointed. This time the Collector was appalled at the lack of education, the ignorance and scant regard paid to education. His report contains lengthy comments on his enquiries and just how low the standards were.

> People commonly did not know who the Queen was; London is described as a country; a picture of a cow being milked produced the response, "It's a lion"; the sea was made of land, not water; "don't know what a river is, or fishes". Women were commonly unable to tell the clock and religion fared no better. "I've heard that (Christ) but I don't know what it is".[7]

J. E. White, the Collector for the 1864 Commission, went to considerable lengths to justify his evidence, since much of it seems to have been ridiculed at a preliminary investigation. "Singularly remarks might have been exceptional, but their importance lies in their number".[8] He commented that ample educational means were provided, but that the ease with which employment could begin commonly at six or eight years of age was a great hindrance to education. Great King Street Baptist Sunday School provided the evidence for the Collector in the form of a table of figures. To this is added a helpful comment on standards:

> It must not be understood that those who are tabulated as being able to read and write can do so efficiently: they can generally read well, but their writing is indifferent. It will suffice as a rule to enable them to keep their "work books" when they become adults, but only a part, not half I would think, would be able to write a letter.[9]

Wycliffe (Bristol Road) Baptist Sunday School was started in 1860 and in 1880 an evening meeting was started for a "class of children too rough and rude and ragged to be in the morning and afternoon schools. Neglected by their parents they were allowed to hang about on the streets on Sunday evenings, a nuisance to the public and to their own great injury".[10] There is some suggestion from the author of the Great King Street report that the worst cases of poverty, ignorance and vice were left untouched by the Sunday Schools. It seems, too, that there were some Sunday School teachers who continued to employ children considered too poor in intellect to be worthy of education to work in their factories on Sunday.

The Wycliffe records show that attempts to break into the groups formerly untouched initially took the form of a children's service, but was later replaced by the currently more fashionable form of graded classes. This Sunday School is described as "very difficult and trying work" and "thanks is recorded to the number of self-denying and faithful teachers".[11] It should not be thought that work elsewhere was necessarily easy. The *Baptist Messenger* for 1874 in a book review mentions that "the work of the Sunday School teacher is every day becoming more onerous".[12]

After the establishment of the Board Schools the curriculum of the Sunday Schools began to change. Reading and Writing decreased in importance and religious matters became more emphasised. A high standard of literacy was catered for, whether this was for older pupils or teachers (who were often former pupils) is not clear. There was by now too a greater recogni-

tion of the need for early positive socialization. "Let it be borne in mind that what the child will be depends to a great extent upon the training you give it and the example you set it. For good or evil, by you, parents, relatives or guardian, it will be influenced for life".[13]

The initial tasks of the Sunday School, reading and writing, were now being undertaken elsewhere, but the social concern which had prompted Raikes, Moore and Trimmer was being directed to other matters.

The social problems in cities were becoming worse. Drinking was recognized as having reached serious proportions and the rise of the various temperance organisations was supported by the nonconformist churches and, to a lesser extent, by the Anglican and Catholic churches. The popular impression of the link between nonconformist churches and total abstinence owes a lot to their activities during the late nineteenth century.

Renewed efforts in social matters probably gave point to church work as had the provision of instruction in reading and writing earlier. Probably many of the new lower middle class nonconformists found themselves in a rather precarious social position. It would have been easy for them to slip back into former habits. They realised, too, the material goods which "ale money" could buy. Although the Baptists, for example, supported the Band of Hope and many Sunday Schools had branches attached, it is interesting to note that the entertainment accounts for the 1864 Baptist Union Annual Assembly held in Birmingham included items for ale and wines.[14]

Other activities were introduced which were educational in a wider context. Wycliffe started a Savings Club in 1870 which was discontinued about 1907 since "the facilities offered by the Post Office for the collection of small sums of money from children at Board Schools seemed to render its continuance unnecessary".[15] Summer outings were organised and many photographs exist which show apparently well-dressed individuals at such places as Malvern, Stratford and Hay-on-Wye. The role of the Sunday School now seemed to supplement the day school and a general raising of the level of literacy meant that activities like plays, debates and musical gatherings were now possible. Activities were designed to be as attractive as possible to children and young people in the hope that they would be influenced by the mores of the teachers. "We naturally imbibe the manners, the sentiments, yea the very habits of those with whom we like to associate".[16]

Adult Schools

Not long after 1870 Adult Schools became a common addition to Sunday Schools. Initially these met only on Sundays, but later evening meetings for specialist activities were added. Clearly the increasing job opportunities which existed on the railways, for example, or the advantages to a small shopkeeper or his assistant of "ciphering" or the developing areas of insurance and rent collection all acted as stimuli to adults. The fact that many more children were now able to read and write no doubt prompted parents to learn too.

Adult Schools were not new to Birmingham. In 1845 George Cadbury opened the Severn Street School and Joseph Sturge had been active shortly before this. Their chief purpose had been that adults could be taught to read the Bible themselves and consequently tended to be associated with a denomination. Cadbury's immediate goal was educational but his longer term aims were social and spiritual. His school was organised on non-sectarian grounds and he encouraged others to be the same. He did, though, encourage his scholars to associate with and form strong links with churches of their own. One school opened in Hope Street in 1881 with seven teachers and five pupils, but within a few years this had grown to over two hundred pupils. Reading, writing and arithmetic were taught, but a Bible lesson was always included.

Clark Street Adult School was opened in 1875 and, although it altered its style several times, opened and closed various branches and varied its curricula, it continued until about 1938. Financing Adult Schools was usually difficult. Clark Street was unable to obtain any assistance from the City.

> In proportion to the membership of the school, the charges levied by the School Board (for the use of the premises) which could not be induced to regard the Adult School Movement as essentially educational, were a serious handicap... The Movement did not seem, at that time, nor has it at any time since received liberal recognition and treatment at the hands of the education authorities of Birmingham.[17]

Initially, the school was funded by the teachers. Later, students contributed 1d each week and the teachers 3d. Activities at Clark Street consisted of the usual mixture of reading, writing and Bible study, but arithmetic and dictation are recorded as being popular. Students were involved from an early time in the organisation and running of the school. The democratic methods involved the students in decision making and often later in teaching. Many of the ancillary activities were organised entirely by the students. There was a benevolent fund, a sick and dividend club and a savings club. In 1881 a library was introduced, students making the cupboard in which it was housed. There was a social club which organised outings, a St John's Ambulance Brigade class and a Temperance Society. For a time there was a flourishing military band but this was discontinued in 1907 since the majority of the members declined to be full members of the school and only wanted to attend band practice. This illustrates the adherence of the managers to the principles of the school. Another interesting item from the records is the decision to cease the "secular half-hour" (the teaching of reading and writing) in 1899. Lessons on history, literature or public health were introduced since "all who entered were now able to read and write due to the Free Board School education".[18]

Socialist Schools

The socialist movements saw a working formula in the Sunday Schools and adapted it to suit their own ends. The establishment of a socialist press gave new impetus to their activities. If the traditional Sunday School taught Christian ethics and inculcated a Christian outlook, with all its social overtones, it was argued that a socialist movement could teach socialist ethics and a socialist outlook to the young by similar means.[19]

In 1843 *The Northern Star*[20] wrote:

> The necessity that exists for Sunday Schools is a strong condemnation of all our fiscal, political and social arrangements. The Sabbath should be a day of rest. But there is no rest for the children of the poor. The working day is the time for the schoolmaster to pursue his avocation!

In May 1837 a branch of AACAN (Association of All Classes of All Nations) was formed, meeting in the socialist institution in Well Lane. 95 paying members are recorded and meetings were held twice on Sunday and on Wednesday evenings "for purposes of propaganda". A separate body, having thirty members, dealt with business matters, such as the acquisition of land, purchasing stock and investment. "One evening in 1836 or 1837 a... man (George Holyoake) entered the Well Lane institution under the impression that he would hear a then celebrated Baptist preacher. To his amazement and, according to his own statement at the time, to his great disappointment, he found that the speaker was Robert Owen... The New Lanark philosopher very quickly converted the erstwhile Baptist, for ... less than twelve months later he occasionally read the lesson".[21] The reference to "reading the lesson" is illuminating, as too are other references to a "small number of missionaries": or "Socialist Bishops", and to the "Tract Society". It seems that the gulf between the sacred and secular Sunday Schools was widening. Owen was booked to speak at the Town Hall, but permission was withdrawn by the High Bailiff when he learned "that a portion of Mr Owen's purpose was to subvert the foundations of religion and attack a most vital part of our social relations".

Conflicting references recur where prominent socialists were both active in co-operative and political organisations as well as actively involved in churches. In some cases politicians probably found it advantageous to subscribe nominally to some church, but in many cases people seem to have worked diligently in both types of organisation. For example, the author's great grandfather was a member of the Management Committee of the Birmingham Co-operative Society for eighteen years and a Baptist Sunday School Superintendent for thirty four.

Epilogue

Initially the attractions offered by the religious Sunday Schools were considerable and increased job opportunities vastly for those able to learn the techniques offered. Later,

the democratic institutions and those which offered progression to the position of teacher were attractive to the emerging lower middle classes. Sunday Schools represent a large number of individual efforts, initiated by individuals, performed by individuals and offered to individuals. It is important to guard against sweeping generalisations, but their contribution to the developing educational system was great: initially at the level of teaching basic skills, but later adding refinement to the Board School. Throughout they had social aims of orderliness and development of the individual. Kitson Clark[22] suggests that they provided the starting point for many people who became active in politics, more so, he suggests, perhaps surprisingly, than the secularist Sunday Schools.

NOTES

1 Laqueur, T. W., *Religion and Respectability*, New Haven and London, 1976.

2 More, H., "A Comprehensive View of Sunday Schools". Quoted in *The Teacher's Magazine 1830* , p.75, and reprinted in Kendal, G., *Robert Raikes: A Critical Study*, London, 1939, p.136.

3 Trimmer, Sarah, *Trimmer's Sacred History. Vol.1.* Pub. R. Raikes, Gloucester, 1788, Preface.

4 Langley, A. S., *Birmingham Baptists Past and Present*, London, 1939, p.123.

5 Report of the District Inspector for Birmingham, R. D. Grainger, to the Royal Commission on the employment of children. Reprinted by the Irish University Press in the series *Reprints of Nineteenth Century British Parliamentary Papers. Children's Employment Vol. 10*, f.190-f.203, (1843).

6 Ibid.

7 Report by J. E. White, Collector to H. M. Commissioners, enquiring into Metal Manufacturers of the Birmingham District. *Irish University Press Reprints of Nineteenth Century British Parliamentary Papers. Children's Employment. Vol.14*, 1864, 98.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ross, Jean (Ed.), *Wycliffe Baptist Church, Jubilee Record*, Birmingham, 1911.

11 Ibid.

12 *The Baptist Messenger for 1874*, London, p.324.

13 *The Baptist Messenger for 1873*, London, p.102.

14 Langley, A. S., op.cit., p.242.

15 Ross, J., op.cit., p.62.

16 *Baptist Year Book 1874*, London, Text and Meditation for 7th December.

17 Lewis, H. J., *History of Clark St Adult School and Branches, 1875-1930*. Birmingham, 1931.

18 Ibid., p.19.

19 Simon, B., *Studies in the History of Education, Vol.2. Education and the Labour Movement*, London, 1965. This deals with socialist Sunday schools at some length.

20 *The Northern Star*, 15th April, 1843. This was the main Chartist newspaper.

21 *History of the Birmingham Co-operative Society Ltd. 1881-1931*. Birmingham, p.14.

22 Kitson Clark, G., *The Making of Victorian England*, London, 1962, p.165.

CHRISTOPHER JAMES

Mr Allan H. Calder, F.C.A., Treasurer of the Society from 1934 to 1965 and Vice-President since 1966 died on 10 February 1983. We remember his service with gratitude. An appreciation will appear in the next issue.