



National Archives, Ireland

Historical Commentary for 1818

The Chief Secretary's Registered Papers for 1818, while fewer in number than those for the following years (the papers increase in volume year on year) cover the full range of events for that year. Reflecting the unsettled state of Irish society, the papers cast light on official responses to outrage and criminality, in particular the administration of prisons, convict management and transportation. Public health, or more precisely containment of fever, features strongly in 1818 as does the more general problem of poverty and its alleviation. The Chief Secretary's Office attracts a constant flow of applications for employment, advancement, preferment and superannuation; we also learn of economic failure, bankruptcy and emigration. The papers reflect early developments in trade and industry, especially in textiles, and reveal much about construction of harbours, canals and roads. Insights are also provided into major institutions such as the Post Office, the House of Industry, customs and excise, hospitals, and the Irish judicial system. Education, religion and mental health provision are three areas of particular interest.

Access to education by the Irish poor in 1818 was severely restricted due to the fragmentary and incomplete nature of provision across the island. A number of competing but thinly scattered educational options were available to those requiring instruction. Hedge schools, the refuge of substantial numbers of poorer Irish Catholics increased following relaxation of the penal laws in the late eighteenth century, but overall standards of teaching were of indifferent quality. It is reckoned that, by the middle 1820s, parents of approximately three to four hundred thousand children paid fees to hedge school masters, for an education that usually included little more than the 'three Rs'.¹ Neither could the Church of Ireland parochial school system, which had its origins in an act of 1537, claim to serve the nation, having just 36,498 children on its books by 1823. Also, Protestant diocesan schools, established by an act of 26 June 1570, appeared to provide for only a small portion of the eligible population. They included some higher level subjects in their curriculum, such as Latin and French. Growth of these schools advanced at a very uneven rate; only twelve individual schools are mentioned in a parliamentary return of 1831 from the Commissioners of Education, having a total of 419 pupils on the roll. Nor did the introduction of royal grammar schools in the planted counties of Ulster have a widespread impact, the institutions in total teaching just 343 pupils by 1831.²

The progress of Protestant charter schools was also limited, and though bolstered by parliamentary aid, taught few more than 2,000 children by the middle 1820s.³ These were denominationally mixed schools, but offered religious instruction exclusively in Protestant doctrine, and so naturally attracted accusations of proselytism from leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. Gaining access to funds voted by Parliament for their support was the purpose of a letter from James Adamson, secretary of the Incorporated Society for Promoting English Protestant Schools in Ireland, or 'charter school society' to Sir Edward B. Baker, Military Secretary, Dublin Castle, about mid - 1818. The secretary expresses his immediate need for an advance of £10,000 for



'payment of the Accounts of the Masters of the several Charter Schools, for subsisting the Children and for the usual ordinary Expenses of the Institution' [CSO/RP/1818/800](#) .

In mid -1818, a petition for monetary aid was sent by the Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor of Ireland, otherwise known as the 'Kildare Place Society' to the Lord Lieutenant. A payment of nearly £6,000 was requested for the maintenance of the society [CSO/RP/1818/813](#) . The Kildare Place Society was founded in 1811 with an ethos of providing non-denominational education to the poor of Ireland. It provided for shared teaching to pupils of all religious beliefs of regular literary subjects, while promoting daily reading of the Bible unaccompanied by verbal elucidation. Much in the society's constitution can be traced back to the recommendations of the Commissioners of the Board of Education in Ireland, which investigated and reported upon the state of education in the country over the period 1806-12. The fourteenth report of the commissioners stipulated amongst other things the establishment of a permanent body of commissioners to oversee Irish education, with power to distribute grants and select texts for use in schools. Significantly, interference with any child's faith was explicitly forbidden and the spheres of secular teaching and religious instruction were to be kept wholly separate, with oversight of the latter resting with local clergymen. By 1820, the Kildare Place Society had a total of 381 schools throughout Ireland, and its masters provided instruction to some 26,474 pupils.⁴

From its inception, the society received broad support from the Catholic hierarchy, but this was slowly eroded as suspicions were aroused about its use of funds to support Protestant missionary agencies, and of failure to honour the agreement respecting reading of scripture in classrooms without remark. In 1819, Daniel O'Connell raised objections about the religious impartiality of the society, and subsequently withdrew his support. In January 1821, he was joined in opposition by the Catholic Professor of Theology at St Patrick's College, *Maynooth*, John MacHale, who made a call for denominationally separate education. This concept was already making headway in the Christian Brothers schools, founded in 1802 by Edmund Rice of Waterford, and granted approval by a bull of Pope Pius VII in 1820.⁵ During the 1820s of further inquiries into the state of Irish education took place, in particular the reports of the Irish Education Inquiry of 1825-26, which underscored the growing consensus in support of separate literary and doctrinal instruction for all children. These intellectual developments formed the foundation for the introduction of a national system of education in 1831.⁶

Due to the patchy configuration of Irish educational provision in the late 1810s, finding secure employment in the teaching profession was difficult. Andrew Madden, of Mullingar, County Westmeath, made application to the Chief Secretary's Office for a post in an English school. His qualifications for the position were operating a teaching academy in Birr, County Offaly, and serving with the Loyal Independent troops during the 1798 uprising; he also added that he had signed a memorial in opposition to Catholic emancipation [CSO/RP/1818/490](#) .



A similar application was received by the Chief Secretary in November 1818 from Dorothea Browne of Dublin. She wrote in hope of securing financial aid to return to employment, for, she lamented: ‘an expensive recourse to medical aid obliged me to part with nearly all my clothes – so that I cannot possibly resume my employment as a teacher unless I am relieved by the benevolent assistance I solicit’. It seems unlikely that she secured the necessary assistance, since she was identified by Dublin Castle as ‘a person of very improper Character’ (annotation on the reverse side of her letter) [CSO/RP/1818/49](#) .

Education formed part of the wider training offered to inmates in such institutions as reformatories, asylums and prisons. The value of such tuition was stressed by Rev. Dr. George Lambert, in his application to the Lord Lieutenant to secure further support for school facilities at Carrickfergus Gaol, County Antrim. Lambert declares himself particularly impressed with the spiritual deportment of prisoners, and remarks favourably upon the ‘Earnestness with which they received an address of advice which I directed to them respecting the greater Value that should be placed on their reading the Bible in Preference to every other Instruction that was afforded them’ [CSO/RP/1818/424](#) .

The need for a training seminary for priests of the Roman Catholic faith was finally acceded to by government in 1795, with the establishment of St. Patrick’s College at Maynooth, County Kildare. Through its foundation the government answered calls for relief from moderate Catholics. It also served to satisfy the natural reservations of the government and the Irish hierarchy to the threat posed by the revolutionary seminaries of Continental Europe.⁷ From its inception, St. Patrick’s College was a recipient of partial endowment from parliament. Writing to the Lord Lieutenant in June 1818, the secretary to the seminary’s Trustees, Andrew Dunn, made a request for payment of £2,500 ‘to defray the Charge of the Establishment of the College for the current quarter’ [CSO/RP/1818/804](#) . Studies of the social composition of the Maynooth priesthood have revealed that most who trained there were the sons of reasonably endowed farmers, merchants or shopkeepers.⁸

In 1818, religion, whether defined as doctrine taught by a particular denomination, or as a badge of political identification, remained a socially and intellectually powerful force which survived the political excesses of the previous century. As such, it formed one of the central components of the new competitive regime that developed and grew in Ireland after 1820. The denominational claims of the Roman Catholic Church and increasing demand for Catholic Emancipation, as well as growing Catholic opposition to the privileged position of the Established Church, made evangelical members of the Church of Ireland (as well as other Protestant missionary agencies) respond with renewed attempts to convert Catholics to the Protestant faith.

The Church of Ireland, following the Act of Union, continued to occupy a somewhat precarious position in Irish society. By virtue of its ‘established’ status it laid claim to the whole of Ireland as its field of mission, but was impeded by a close identification with the mechanism of government. The church suffered negatively from collection of tithes in many parishes across Ireland, and rectors could become the focus of local



hostility if acting in defence of the law as magistrates. The church was heavily burdened by a number of institutional weaknesses, including clerical non-residence, pluralism, lack of places of worship and buildings in need of repair.⁹ A number of these issues featured in a letter from Frederick Homan, comptroller of British Mail Office, Dublin, to the Chief Secretary, written late in 1817. Using his immediate neighbourhood of Kilcullen in County Dublin as a point of reference, he complained of payment of 'heavy cess', neglect of roads and bridges, lack of representation on the grand jury, and declared no fewer than six parishes are 'without a Church, a Clergyman or resident magistrate' [CSO/RP/1818/331](#) .

Similar concerns led to a petition signed by 118 Protestant inhabitants of Clonmel, County Tipperary, to the Lord Lieutenant. Their town, they claimed 'being large, populous, and of considerable importance as a place of Commerce stands much in need of a second House of Worship under the rites of the Established Church'. They warned that, in consequence of having just one church in the town, members attend 'meetings of Dissenters at which their children are liable to imbibe notions of Religion calculated to alienate them, in process of time, from the Established Church' [CSO/RP/1818/162](#) .

Apprehension about erosion of denominational identity was also a factor in Sir Vesian Peck's application to the Under Secretary in early 1818 seeking the appointment of a clergyman for the French Protestant church in Cork city. Peck acknowledges that a French-speaking minister would be acceptable to the church, but observes 'as to reall [sic] French Protestants I suppose not one family now living, the grand Children and the Children of the Old Branches formaly [sic] very numerous being married into the Native Irish of this place' [CSO/RP/1818/537](#) .

The increasing involvement of Protestant evangelical agencies in Ireland since the beginning of the nineteenth century led up to the great Protestant missionary drive known as the 'Second Reformation' of the 1820s. With a shared objective of carrying the reformed faith to all allegedly in need of spiritual enlightenment, the movement united pious individuals from the major strands of Protestantism under a single banner. Conveyance of the evangelical message to the masses, especially to the Catholic majority, was accomplished by a variety of means. Itinerant missionaries visited many of the less accessible regions of the country. Their work was reinforced by a general campaign of dissemination of Bibles and religious tracts, and through the foundation of schools in which scriptural instruction was prioritised. By 1818, a number of agencies largely under the auspices of the Anglican Church were active in Ireland. These included the Hibernian Bible Society, established in 1806, the Sunday School Society, founded in 1809, and the Religious Tract and Book Society, established in 1810.

Aimed at bringing the gospel in the vernacular to the Catholic population, the Irish Society for Promoting the Education of the Native Irish through the Medium of their own Language was formed in 1818.¹⁰ Having initially embraced a wider definition of religious propagation, by the mid 1820s the Irish Society focused on provision of Irish language instruction to facilitate Bible study.¹¹ A letter from Thaddaeus Connellan, one of the central figures in the Irish Society, to the Under Secretary in January



1818, underscored the commitment of such agencies to evangelise in the Irish language. Connellan wrote in hope of obtaining and putting into general use the Bible in the Irish language, contending that it would dispel spiritual ignorance in the native population: 'many of my scholars meet on Sundays and hold meetings with their Neighbours where the Tenets of popery are freely discussed with much sense & Judgment and a great quantity of the Scriptures is much sought for; known they are not in readiness yet the Committee of the Bible Society granted me 500 copies of the Gospel of St Matthew as soon as ready to give my scholars' [CSO/RP/1818/67](#) .

Over time, the activities of the Protestant evangelical agencies proved to be socially divisive and led to a deterioration of denominational relations in Ireland.¹² One person who claims to have experienced persecution was Nicholas Martin, probably a native of County Armagh. Writing to the Lord Lieutenant in January 1818 requesting assistance with finding employment as a school master, he complains he is subject to local harassment because of his departure from the Roman Catholic religion: 'banished by the Catholic Clergy, and persecuted by them' [CSO/RP/1818/441](#) .

Institutional care of those diagnosed as insane prior to the nineteenth century rested precariously with such agencies as the houses of correction, the county infirmaries and the houses of industry, where established. An exception was St Patrick's Hospital, Dublin, opened for the sole purpose of affording treatment to those with mental illness; built in 1757, it was financed by a bequest from Jonathan Swift. As the nineteenth century progressed, a more general recognition of the needs of the psychiatric sick developed. Action was taken by government to provide more asylums and a more organised approach to their governance, inspection and management was introduced.

The Richmond Lunatic Asylum was established in Dublin in 1814. William Wainright, secretary to the Asylum, applied to the Lord Lieutenant in 1818 for payment of £4,000 for its maintenance. Requesting advance of the sum, Wainright explained that the institution had 'incurred several Debts since the 5th January last, are pressed for payment and have no means of discharging the same' [CSO/RP/1818/795](#) .

Legislation to buttress the growing involvement of the state in such institutional care was passed in July 1817, allowing for the creation of district asylums for the lunatic poor of Ireland.¹³ Plans to offer sheltered care to this vulnerable sector are reflected in a number of letters addressed by Francis Johnston, architect and inspector of civil buildings, Eccles Street, Dublin, to the Commissioners for Superintending Pauper Lunatic Asylums in Ireland. With respect to the design of the proposed accommodation, Johnston remarks 'I have made no part of the Buildings more than two floors high, a great part only one, which will contribute much to wholesome ventilation' [CSO/RP/1818/390](#) .

Existing forms of accommodation were ill equipped to manage those with mental health problems, as evidenced by a complaint from the governors of the House of Industry, Wexford, to the Chief Secretary's Office in 1818. Due to the large numbers of insane persons in residence, the governors were 'compelled to refuse admission,



to Paupers and others whom this institution should take under its management and care' [CSO/RP/1818/687](#) . A similar letter was sent to the Chief Secretary's Office in February 1818 by William Pilsworth, inspector of Maryborough Gaol, Queen's County [Laois]. Pilsworth required immediate removal of a lunatic prisoner to Richmond Asylum for, 'by the noise this poor man makes it may put the Gaoler off his Guard' [CSO/RP/1818/380](#) . Security concerns, combined with wider issues such as prisoner classification and internal discipline, underlay the inspector's appeal to government.

Considerations of a wider pecuniary nature were expressed by Charles Todd, secretary to the Commissioners for the Superintending and Directing the Erection, Establishment, and Regulation of Asylums for the Lunatic Poor in Ireland, Dublin, in a letter to the Chief Secretary, late in 1818. Reporting on an application from south-east Ireland, he indicated support for the establishment of a combined lunatic asylum for counties Waterford and Wexford. He confirms that the proposed asylum is agreeable to the governors of the House of Industry at Wexford and would accomplish the object in view 'at a smaller expense to the public than by separate Establishments' [CSO/RP/1818/433](#) .

- [1](#) W. E. Vaughan (ed), *A New History of Ireland, Vol. V, Ireland Under the Union 1801-70*, (Oxford, 1989), p. 524.
- [2](#) Vaughan, *A New History of Ireland*, p. 526.
- [3](#) Vaughan, *A New History of Ireland*, p. 526.
- [4](#) Vaughan, *A New History of Ireland*, pp 528-529.
- [5](#) J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland 1603-1923*, (London, 1966), p. 312.
- [6](#) S. J. Connolly, *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford, 1998), p. 499.
- [7](#) Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland*, pp 256-257.
- [8](#) K Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity*, (Essex, 1989), p. 76.
- [9](#) Sean Connolly, *Religion and Society in Nineteenth Century Ireland* (Dublin, 1985), p. 7.
- [10](#) Vaughan, *A New History of Ireland*, p. 78.
- [11](#) Pádraig De Brún, *Scriptural Instruction in the Vernacular: the Irish Society and its Teachers 1818-1827*, (Dublin, 2009), p. 10.
- [12](#) Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster*, (London, 2000), p. 276.
- [13](#) Vaughan, *A New History of Ireland*, p. 210.

Nigel Johnston, Project Archivist