

POPULAR EDUCATION AND LITERACY

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Literacy and Education in England 1640-1900 by Lawrence Stone "Past and Present" Number 42 February 1969, pp. 69 - 139.

Evangelical Religion and Popular Education by John McLeish. Methuen 1969.

Both of these authors make important contributions to the history of education where it is concerned with the problem of mass literacy. Their approaches are very different, and the purpose of this note is simply to draw attention to their work and comment briefly upon what each has to say.

Professor Stone disarms criticism at the outset by his statement "that it is impossible to provide more than tentative and provisional answers to the many problems involved." Despite this disclaimer, he has in the event produced a rigorously argued and well documented account of the development of literacy in England over two hundred and sixty years. He concludes that between 1530 and 1680 there was an expansion of education at all levels; between 1680 and 1780, "there was a marked slowing down of the growth in basic literacy due to a fear among the upper classes that popular education was a contributory factor in causing the revolutionary activity of the 1640's and 50's". After 1780, popular education increased rapidly once more. This is a summary of Professor Stone's argument; as he himself says, "a great deal more research is needed to qualify this highly tentative, provisional even speculative outline of the story".

Such a bald summary does scant justice to the subtlety and skill with which the argument is presented, and one of the most valuable features of this essay is the concept of educational levels which were geared to the needs and aspirations of different social classes.

The lowest level, namely that concerned with basic literacy - the ability to read and possibly to sign one's name - is in many ways the most complex of all and certainly the hardest to assess within a historical or a social context.

Until fairly recently historians of education - A.E. Dolob's was, of course, a notable exception - have been mainly concerned with the provision of education for the poor and with the Parliamentary Commissions which usually preceded the tentative steps taken by successive governments to provide a series of educational palliatives which were forced to be a compromise between the demands of opposing religious factions whose zeal for education was outweighed by the zeal they exhibited when fighting each other in the name of orthodoxy.

Stone's approach is far removed from this, and he rightly sees the relationship between society and education in very different terms. As he points out, a two-way process is at work here. What I think he does perhaps disregard is the inner tension within the process of popular education itself, between the formal and informal. The former represented both theory and practice of a scheme of instruction which was designed to perpetuate existing social differences and ensure the continuance of a society in which the poor would feel obliged to be grateful to their betters, frugal, thrifty, honest, pious and hardworking. By informal education is meant the kind of literature which was available to them, and upon which they were able to practise the skill of reading - in the 18th century chapbooks, in the 19th century street ballads, penny dreadfuls, radical and chartist journals etc. The connections between these two elements in education were, I suspect, abrasive - on the one hand there was a type of learning imposed upon the poor by "their betters", and on the other an escapist and a propagandist literature both of whose worlds were in sharp and even violent contrast with the ideals of theorists who saw education either as an act of charity or as the result of benevolent intercession by church or government to make the wheel of industrial society tick over more smoothly.

What Professor Stone has done admirably is to provide a basis for further discussion and analysis of popular education. He has set an example to us all.

John McLeish has approached the subject from a very different point of view. As the title of his book suggests, he is concerned with popular education and the ways in which evangelical religion influenced it. In particular he discusses the work of Griffith Jones and

Hannah More. Each in a different way, though certainly with identical religious motivation, was concerned with offering the children of the poor a limited and rigidly controlled experience of basic evangelical and literary instruction.

Where the author is wrong is to talk of an 18th century "campaign for the elimination of mass illiteracy." There was nothing of the kind. The discussion of such issues was of the most desultory kind and provision of schools, though widely spread, was to say the least, uneven in quality. It might be argued that the efforts of the S.P.C.K. to initiate charity schools represented perhaps a rudimentary campaign, but neither Griffith Jones nor Hannah More worked within the framework.

Of the two, Griffith Jones was the less appealing. Both of them shared a rigid and narrow orthodoxy from which sprang a kind of piety which could chill the act of charity. In her 'Cheap Repository Tracts', however, Hannah More displayed a charm that not even her own overweening evangelism could entirely efface. The achievements of the two reformers are well sketched in this book; there is a reliance upon secondary sources, but this in no way invalidates the general theme of the earlier chapters which are historical. With regard to points of emphasis, I would argue that Hannah More's publishing activities were more important in educational terms than her work in starting schools, but in general the first half of this book makes a very useful contribution to the somewhat sparse contemporary discussion of eighteenth century popular education.

The kernel of this book, and the part of it to which its author is obviously more committed, deals with the interpretation of evangelical educational reform in the light of contemporary social thought. We are offered an economic, an anthropological, a psychological and a sociological evaluation. All are expertly done, and indicate clearly fresh points of departure for the historian of education. Within my present frame of reference, however, a development of this theme is scarcely relevant. What I wish to urge is that studies in literacy must take into account not only how and why the poor were taught to read, but also what in fact they did read: here certainly new interpretations are urgently needed. More precisely, we need to know at what point in history it begins to be possible to talk in terms of mass literacy - a potent factor indeed in society. What were some of the more important implications for society at large, of such a phenomenon?

Both Professor Stone and Professor McLeish have done much to make

it possible to formulate some of these questions. They have provided both fresh concepts and new ideas; and for this we must be grateful to them. Viewed in the light of their work, the counting of signatures in a parish register as a means of assessing literacy appears less satisfactory, despite its obvious attractions for those who like historical evidence plotted on a graph. Because the problems of popular education and literacy will lead us far beyond the search in parish registers, I append a select list of references to some relevant material, much of which, it is to be hoped, will provide further background knowledge for a continuing debate about the history of literacy.

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