

## THE DARING FIRST DECADE OF THE BOARD OF NATIONAL EDUCATION, 1831-1841

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The establishment of the Board of National Education in 1831 was a landmark in the history of Irish education. The following decade was one of excitement and innovation in social policy and the Board, though faced with the task of organising and supporting a non-denominational system in difficult circumstances, did not lack ideas for further educational reform. In this paper the political, social and religious contexts of the birth and early development of the Board are considered. Particular attention is paid to the actual mode of operation and administrative arrangements of the Board: initial moves, the early arrangements for offices, the first rules and regulations and the accountability aspect of the Board's work. Arrangements arrived at for teacher training and teacher salaries and the procedure for establishing the school inspectorate are examined. Other important aspects of the Board's activities which are described are the provision of school textbooks and arrangements for their dissemination, the promotion of agricultural schools, and assistance in the provision of workhouse schools.

### THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The title of this paper may seem strange in view of what might be termed the traditional 'bad press' given to the National Board of Education in Ireland. The original initiative undertaken by the Board just over 150 years ago was an extremely controversial one. Its early progress was surrounded by much strife, fuelled by hostile charges and counter charges and much later evaluative interpretation was overlaid by political and religious attitudes, not always informed by an adequate historical perspective. Most attention, in fact, has focussed on the religious issues surrounding the Board's work.

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This paper attempts to put the spotlight on the work of the Board at a more intimate, human level to see how this corporate group set about its task in establishing a new and, for its day, radical system, to look at its organizational work in laying foundations, to take note of its hopes, and to evaluate its achievements in the context of Irish circumstances during the decade 1831–1841. I will not consider the political conception of the system, I take the ‘marching orders’ of the Board as given and trace the developments undertaken from there. As the Board itself remarked, ‘The State has adopted the system, it is only administered by the Board’ (13, p. 105)

To help get a mental picture of the context in which the Board set to work, it may be useful to sketch something of the political, social, economic, and religious background of Ireland during this decade. It was indeed a fascinating decade of great violence coupled with political skill, of coercion coupled with social reform, of great productivity side by side with appalling poverty, of verbal religious warfare coupled with fundamental change in the fortunes of various denominations, a decade in which Ireland reached its highest ever population figure, for the welfare of which, the fragile hopes of the late thirties and early forties were soon to be cruelly demolished in the cataclysm of the Great Famine.

The Whigs were the political party in power at Westminster for the whole decade, apart from a short interlude of about six months in 1834–35. From 1830 onwards, the right of Westminster to legislate for Ireland was being challenged by O’Connell’s Repeal Movement which sought not an independent Ireland but a local legislature in Dublin. This was firmly resisted by all parties at Westminster. Indeed, the revolts and political upheavals across Europe in 1830 caused great apprehension among the defenders of the political and social status quo. In the early 1830s, Ireland experienced very high levels of social and agrarian unrest, involving the revival of secret societies such as the Whitefeet, Blackfeet, Rockites, and Terryalts. Murder and outrage by a peasantry hungry for vital land and crazed by social injustice and the burden of tithe payment were met with vigorous action by the agents of the law, reinforced by the very harsh Coercion Act of 1833.

Ireland was experiencing what appeared to be an inexorable population explosion. In 1821, the population stood at 6,802,000, by 1831 it was 7,767,000, and by 1841 it had reached 8,175,000, even though over 400,000 had emigrated between 1836 and 1841 (15). The census of 1841

indicates that four fifths of this population were rural, and 40% of the country's houses were one roomed cabins. In the prevailing land ownership structure, with the rights of private property firmly defended by the prevailing socio political orthodoxy, the living conditions of vast numbers were miserable indeed. Survival for many rested with the potato crop, the vulnerability of which was underlined by regional crop failures throughout the 1830s.

While the prevailing socio economic ideology was free enterprise capitalism underpinned by the doctrines of *laissez faire*, Ireland in the 1830s presented a most unusual arena in that it witnessed modifications of this policy in social legislation which were unparalleled elsewhere. The initiative examined here is the establishment of a state supported system of national education in 1831 with strong central control. This provided the state with a role not achieved in England until 1870 or in France until 1881. However, there were other state initiatives on social reform at the time. In 1831, the Board of Works was established which brought about a new efficiency and imagination to public undertakings of various kinds. In 1832, the famous Reform Act was passed for England and, while its provisions as extended to Ireland failed to satisfy O'Connell, it may have helped him to lead 39 Repeal MPs back to Westminster after the 1832 general election. The year 1832 also saw an ameliorative (albeit unsatisfactory) effort regarding payments with the Tithe (Composition Act). The on going work of earlier decades on health provision was continued so that by 1835 there were 70 fever hospitals, 10 lunatic asylums, and over 500 dispensaries. In 1834, the first railway line was opened, though it was only in the post famine period that the railways really expanded. Meanwhile, the Bianconi coaches ferried many travellers, particularly over the southern roads.

The forging of the Lichfield House Compact between O'Connell and the Whigs under Melbourne in 1835 signalled a period of six years, of which it has been said 'the administration basked in a popularity which it had never enjoyed and was never again to enjoy under the Union' (15,p 181). The committed reform efforts of Thomas Drummond as Under Secretary were backed by the Chief Secretary Lord Morpeth and Lord Mulgrave as Lord Lieutenant. Fresh winds of reform began to blow under Drummond's slogan, 'Property has its duties as well as its rights'. The Constabulary Bill of 1836 was followed by new directions to police and armed forces reflecting a more neutral stance by the government. The police, courts, and magistracy were all reformed. More favour was shown to Catholics in public appointments, Lord Russell remarking to Mulgrave

in 1837 that 'the Roman Catholic clergy have more confidence in your government than they have had in any since the revolution in 1688' (quoted in 4, p 225) In 1839, an Irish Poor Law Act was implemented which resulted in the erection of 37 workhouses by 1841. An element of reform in civic administration was achieved by the Municipal Corporation Act of 1840.

Relationships between the churches were very hostile in the 1830s. Deep rooted animosities existed, all the more so in a climate of live proselytism when new patterns of power were evolving. For the Catholics, the Emancipation Act of 1829 was the symbol of a recovered status and was followed by a decade of consolidation and church building. On the other hand, for the Established Church, it represented a giving in to Catholic demands which would subsequently gather momentum and erode the position of the Established Church in Irish society. O'Connell's Repeal Campaign of 1830 added to the apprehension. The Whig idea of establishing a mixed board to superintend a state supported system of education in 1831, rather than one under the aegis of the state's church, proved very hard to accept. The Church Temporalities Act of 1832 signalled further distancing by the state, prefiguring later disestablishment, as it moved in to reform and reorganise church structures and finances. Throughout the thirties, the dispute about the paying of tithes to the Established Church reached such an intensity as to be termed 'the tithe war'. The Tithe Composition Act of 1834 was followed by a more thorough measure of reform in 1838 which effectively solved the problem. Dissenters could unite in sentiment with Catholics against the payment of tithes, but in other matters, particularly education, groups such as the Presbyterian Synod of Ulster in the 1830s were vehemently opposed to Catholicism.

This then was the general context within which the National Board of Commissioners of National Education was invited by the Stanley Letter of 31 October, 1831 to set up a state supported school system. The system was designed to unite the children of the poor in Ireland for combined moral and literary instruction with separate doctrinal instruction. It was in many ways a daunting challenge.

#### THE PERSONNEL AND EARLY ACTIONS OF THE NATIONAL BOARD

The first members of the National Education Board were The Duke of Leinster, Most Reverend Dr Whately, Archbishop of Dublin (Established

Church), Most Reverend Dr Murray, Archbishop of Dublin (Catholic Church), Dr Sadlier, Reverend James Carlile, A.R. Blake, and Robert Holmes. The Duke of Leinster was a liberal Protestant. Dr Whately, a fellow of Oriel College, Oxford, had recently arrived from England. Dr Sadlier was Provost of Trinity College, James Carlile was a Scottish Presbyterian of the Synod of Ulster with a keen interest in education. A.R. Blake was a Catholic who had served on the Education Commission of 1824-27 and on the Poor Law Commission of 1830. Robert Holmes was an independent-minded Unitarian barrister. Thus the Board fulfilled Stanley's desire for 'men of high personal character, including individuals of exalted position in the church' as well as 'professing different religious opinions' (11). At the request of the Board itself, three other commissioners, Sir Patrick Bellew, Richard Greene, and J.P. Kennedy (who resigned shortly after) were appointed in May 1838. Reverend James Carlile resigned in 1838 and was replaced by Dr Henry. In June 1839, Viscount Morpeth, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Alexander MacDonnell, and John Corballis were appointed. In January 1840, Lord Plunket was appointed a Commissioner. Thus, in 1841 the original seven had expanded to 13, reflecting a denominational composition of eight Established Church members, four Catholics, and two Presbyterians.

The original group of seven Commissioners held its first meeting on December 1, 1831 and appointed Mr Thomas F. Kelly to be secretary to the Board at a salary of £500 p.a. (12, 1 December 1831). At its second meeting, next day, Dr Whately's *Christian Lesson* was unanimously approved for display in schools. Its fourth meeting on December 7 was held in the premises made available to them at 30 Upper Merrion Street Dublin. Though the Board agreed early on a quorum of three, it is remarkable how attentive the group was to the responsibilities entrusted to it and the attendance of members was very good. Members of the Board were unpaid and all of them had important other duties. Carlile and Blake were particularly assiduous in the Board's affairs. Because of pressure of demands, Carlile was later raised to the status of Resident Commissioner at a salary of £300 and an allowance for horse and car; in return he lost his emoluments from outside sources.

The Board sought to succeed with an educational initiative in very difficult political circumstances. As the foundations of the infant structure were being laid, attacks came from all quarters; Whately, Murray, and Carlile in particular underwent very bitter criticism from their co-

religionists. As well as the various campaigns by its outright opponents, the Board also faced in its first decade the close scrutiny of three official inquiries – one by the Lords in 1837, one by the Commons in 1837, and one by the select Committee on Foundation Schools in Ireland (Wyse) which sat from 1835 to 1838.

Whatever about the barracking and inquiries, the Board set to work very quickly to make arrangements for the new system. As well as setting up premises with basics, such as toilets, gas fittings, and attendants, and formalizing bank and post office arrangements, the Board immediately prepared a set of regulations for applications for assistance. Some applications had already arrived on their desks (12, 20 December 1831). Query sheets seeking relevant information from applicants were prepared and dispatched. The first four grants, amounting to £525, were issued on January 19, 1832, which was only a matter of weeks after the Board first met. Pending the preparation of its own books, text books, school slates and tablets of the Kildare Place Society and of the Catholic Book Society were made available to schools from February 1832. At first, all applications for aid came directly to the combined Board but, after a while, a sub-committee was appointed to do the investigative work. Towards the end of the decade, Finance and Agricultural Sub-Committees were also set up.

The whole business of processing applications involved much care in investigating applicants, land, sites, and local resources. Promises, rejections and withdrawal of grants from schools were set in motion. As Carlile later remarked 'Applications from different parts of the Kingdom came in with considerable rapidity' (1, p 3). Among the new rules was that the two words 'National School' were to be inscribed on all buildings supported by the Board. Roll books were designed for the schools.

#### THE RELIGIOUS DIFFICULTY

The government had intended that a very strict line was to be drawn between secular and religious instruction. The Board, however, tempered this and got several modifications which allowed some religious content within general instruction and made more flexible arrangements for religious instruction itself. Before taking office the Commissioners had got Stanley, the Chief Secretary, to change 'secular' to 'secular and moral instruction'. Stanley also allowed the Board to drop the requirement of insisting on a register of pupil attendance at places of worship on the

**Sabbath Day** At a conference with Stanley in February 1832, it was agreed that schools of religious orders of monks and nuns could be assisted by the Board. In an 'Explanatory Document' drawn up by the Board and approved by the Government, a distinction between vested and non vested schools was made. Vested schools were built with the Commissioners' aid and were bound by the Board's rules in perpetuity. Non vested schools only received annual grants from the Board and were bound by the rules only as long as they continued to accept aid from the Board (8)

Any changes in the regulations regarding religious instruction were looked at with great suspicion but a case can be made that the desk blueprint needed adaptations when the real circumstances of implementation were encountered. Carlile pleaded this case in evidence on 12 April 1837 to the Commons Committee appointed to enquire into the progress and operation of the new plan of education.

It requires some years experience to understand what could be done, in consequence of the immense variety of circumstances which have come before us (16, p 21)

Under the provision of 'moral' instruction, books of scriptural extracts, avoiding any denominational disputation, were unanimously approved by the Board. These could be used during combined instruction, but were not compulsory. Up to 1837, religious instruction as such could only be given on the day set apart or in the period before or after ordinary school hours. In 1837, a change was made which permitted religious instruction during the ordinary school day provided advance notice was given so that parents with conscientious objections could have their children withdrawn. This trend of extending the original strict rules of demarcation between secular and religious instruction was further emphasized in the Correen Presbyterian School test case in 1839/40 (21). The acceptance of Correen school for aid by the Board meant that non vested schools need no longer be bound by the rules laid down by the Board but could operate under their own school rules provided these were similar to, but not identical with the Board's rules. In effect this allowed non vested schools to veer close to being denominational with a conscience clause. While this had the effect of terminating the bitter Presbyterian campaign against the Board's regulations, it institutionalized the difference between vested and non vested schools and added to the misgivings about the system held by people like Archbishop McHale.

It was not, however, that Dr McHale was arguing against the watering down of the principle of demarcation between secular and religious instruction. Rather, his plea was for state support for full and open denominational schooling which was not politically feasible at the time. The public clash on the national system between Dr Murray who accepted the mixed denominational system and Dr McHale who opposed it was eventually decided by Rome in a rescript of 1841 which expressed tolerance for the system but allowed each bishop to exercise his discretion in the matter (cf 2)

The modifications of the rules with regard to religious instruction were, of course, available for all groups but they failed to break down the opposition of the Established Church which felt that, as of yore, it should control the schooling system. The government and Board stood firm against very powerful and political pressure from this source. The objection the Church had to the system itself was bluntly put by Dean Burgh when he stated in 1837 that the ground of opposition 'was the absence of proselytism from the national system' (18, p 68). Having failed to break the national system, the Established Church set up its rival school system, The Church Education Society, in 1839. One of the effects of this was to create a situation over much of the south of Ireland whereby the national schools were boycotted by the Established Church and so were attended largely by Catholic pupils only. Of course, a great deal more could be said about the whole religious difficulty and a number of studies have concentrated on this. In passing on to deal with other aspects of the Board's activity, I suggest that the Board exercised much more prudent judgment and political skill than it is generally given credit for in a minefield over which the shrapnel of denominational invective blazed with dazzling ferocity.

#### THE ACCOUNTABILITY AND STATUS OF THE BOARD

A high level of public accountability was expected from the National Board. As well as responses to queries from the Lord Lieutenant, the Board issued its first Report in 1834 and thereafter, until its abolition in 1922, annual reports and, when appropriate, detailed appendices, on its work. Members of the Board, particularly Carlile and Blake, were subjected to detailed examination by three parliamentary committees within the first seven years of the system. Even at that, their position was very much a sink or swim one, in very turbulent waters, as they had no statutory basis until they got their charter of incorporation in 1844.

The Board's sense of the precariousness of its position emerges clearly from the minutes of January 1835 in the context of the brief return to power of the Tories. The Board wrote to the Lord Lieutenant 'seeking the intentions of the new Government about the system of national education' so as to be able 'to plan our future proceedings' (12, 9 January 1835). In 1834 and 1836, it successfully opposed cuts in its estimates by the Treasury (12, 24 April 1834 and 12 May 1836), though the amounts given at times fell short of its aspirations and plans. It also successfully opposed an effort by the Treasury to have detailed investigation of its expenditure and a controlling role exercised by the civil audit office. Having secured the support of the Lord Lieutenant, the Board grandiloquently replied to the Treasury, 'The Commissioners are their own Treasurer' and the audit office was confined to checking the sums, as it were, allowing the Board great freedom in the disbursement of its funds.

During the benign period of the Lichfield House Compact, the Board seems to have had very cordial relationships with the Castle administration. Interviews with the Lord Lieutenant were promptly granted and support was forthcoming, including visits by the Lord Lieutenant to the Training College in Marlborough Street. Drummond's support was symbolized by the donation of £1,000 by his widow for the female training establishment following Drummond's untimely death, probably from overwork, in 1840 (20). From 1839 to 1841, the Chief Secretary himself, Lord Morpeth, sat on the Board and was a regular attender. This was a precedent never again followed. On the defeat of the Whigs in 1841, Morpeth's goodwill was reflected also in a personal donation of £1,000 to the Board (18).

#### BUILDINGS

Despite the rather tentative legal basis on which the Board worked, an example of its daring was its plan for permanency as represented by its own building programmes in the first decade. The Commissioners involved themselves in the problems of seeking sites or appropriate buildings, of arranging for tenders, estimates, title deeds, architect plans, approvals, financial provision, and so on. As early as May 1832, the Board started to convert and fit up rear buildings at its premises in 30 Upper Merrion Street, so as to have male and female model schools there (12, 24 May 1832). In January 1833, arrangements were made to have Board of Works architects available for consultation.

The Commissioners felt the need of more spacious and suitable premises

and between May and July 1833 they carried through negotiations for the purchase of premises in Henrietta Street, but, because of problems of title the project eventually fell through. Undaunted, they latched on to the purchase of Tyrone House in Marlborough Street, and managed to tie up the deal in January 1835. They purchased the house and about four acres of city-centre grounds for £6,750 (12, 2 October 1834). As well as their own offices they envisaged a male model school, a female model school, an infant school, a training college and various other ancillary buildings on the site. The overall cost of the Tyrone House development was £29,605. The Board held its first meeting in Marlborough Street on April 14, 1836 when it also decided that a front railing should be erected at a cost of £84 (12, 12 May 1836).

Relaxation was not the order of the day and, having got the Chief Secretary's agreement in October of the same year, 1836, the Board initiated developments which led to acquisition of the Glasnevin Model Farm and Garden (later known as the Albert College) which opened in May 1838. The stocking and fitting up of the Glasnevin site went on in 1839 and 1840 and included the purchase of such things as a threshing machine for £60 (12, 21 May 1840). Simultaneously with the planning for Glasnevin, moves were undertaken in January 1836 towards getting a site and buildings in Talbot Street, close to Marlborough Street, for a female training college and student residence (12, 21 January 1836). The plans were approved and sanction obtained from the Chief Secretary, Lord Morpeth, and the Treasury by Christmas 1837 (12, 22 December 1836). However, the female training college did not open until 1842, with the residence, called after its benefactor, the Drummond Institution, opening in 1844. It is gratifying to note that these three major building projects – Tyrone House, Glasnevin, and the Drummond Institution – undertaken by the Board in the 1830s are still functioning as centres of Irish education activity, Tyrone House being distinguished as the seat of the Minister for Education.

#### TEACHER TRAINING AND TEACHER SUPPORT

As has been noted, the Board very quickly took action on Stanley's directive of 'establishing and maintaining a model school in Dublin and training teachers for country schools' by converting the outhouses in Merrion Street to model schools. The school for boys opened on March 8, 1833 and that for girls on April 15, 1833. However, Stanley's other requirement that, prior to employment, teachers should have received

previous instruction in a model school in Dublin, proved to be impracticable. Accordingly, the first group of teachers summoned to the model schools in February 1834 were existing teachers who now undertook a three month course in the model schools. The first Principal of the boys' model school of 300 pupils was Dr MacArthur, at the princely salary of £300 per annum (According to Carlile he had given evidence of outstanding skill and efficiency in a school run earlier by Carlile) Mrs Campbell, who had experience in the Kildare Place system, was appointed Head Principal of the girls' school of 100 pupils, at a salary of £90 per annum. The teachers in training lived in city lodgings and were allowed 12 shillings per week for board and keep.

This arrangement, however, was seen merely as a temporary expedient. The model schools in Tyrone House were ready for pupils on March 11 1836 and for teachers in October. By 1839, the schools had 752 boys, 558 girls, and 329 infants on roll. The male training college was opened in 1838. From 1835, it was clear that the Board conceived of the training course as a two year one but the exigencies of teacher supply meant the continuation of what were now half yearly courses of five months each allowing a double cohort in each year. MacArthur was transferred from the model school to the new training college but objections were made to this appointment and some others. These decisions were reversed in 1839 and Robert Sullivan and Reverend Father McGauley were appointed as Professors instead. The Board had hoped to have five Professors but these two men divided the courses between them — Sullivan dealing with education, history, geography, and literature and McGauley teaching natural philosophy and mathematics. The course included instruction in these subjects, mastery of the Board's reading books, observation of teaching, and teaching practice. It is clear from Sullivan's lectures, published in 1842, that he favoured the simultaneous instruction method as distinct from individual instruction and the monitorial system (22). The simultaneous method resembled what is known today as the class instruction system whereby the teacher, rather than a monitor, taught the pupils in classes of roughly similar stage of development and age range (22). Students in training were now lodged mainly in Glasnevin where they also undertook instruction in agriculture and husbandry (The walk from Glasnevin to Marlborough Street was not much regarded, it may have helped to knock *teasbach* out of the chaps as was the case with the turnip snagging on the Glasnevin model farm!) During the seven year period from 1834 to 1841, the Board put 781 teachers through a training course (6).

It was one thing to train teachers but it was another thing to retain them within the service and teacher conditions at the time were not attractive. Stanley had left a blank space in the section of his letter where he refers to Board gratuities for teachers operating under their rules. The blank was never satisfactorily filled! In its Report for 1835 the Board indicated the image of teachers it wished to see

Living in friendly habits with the people, not greatly elevated above them, but so provided for as to be able to maintain a respectable station, trained to good habits, identified in interest with the State, and therefore anxious to promote a spirit of obedience to lawful authority (19, pp 15 16)

The Board went on to say that properly trained teachers should have a certain salary of £25 per annum, with an added bonus of £5 on the basis of an inspector's favourable report and that they should be furnished with apartments adjoining the school. However, this relatively happy conception did not materialize. In the early years, the gratuities to teachers were mainly in the range of £8 to £12 per annum. Local subscriptions and school fees were to be the main emolument. As Carlile admitted to the Commons Committee in 1837, there were 'some instances where the teacher gets little or nothing beyond the small "salary" given by the Board' (16, p 67). The Report for 1838 put the position on a more satisfactory basis when it declared, 'The Commissioners will grant a salary to each teacher of from £10 to £30 a year, varying according to the nature and extent of the instruction which his school affords', (7, p 69). In the same year, Carlile was replaced by Alexander MacDonnell as Resident Commissioner at £1,000 per year (12, 26 May 1839). The Report for 1839 states

In our former reports we expressed our regret that we had not means to remunerate our teachers in proportion to the importance and value of their labours. We have now, however, been enabled to adopt measures for classifying and increasing the salaries of deserving teachers, by which we hope the whole body will be gradually elevated and improved (21, p 81)

The word 'gratuity' was now altogether replaced by 'salary' and the new classification scheme was as follows. First class teachers received £20 if male, £15 if female, second class teachers received £15 if male and £12 if female, while third class teachers received £12 if male and £10 if female

(19, Appendix, p 89) The class in which teachers were ranked depended on their qualifications as determined by training college professors or school inspectors and on their proved capacity and efficiency as conductors of schools. It was a Board rule that a further income to the teachers should be secured by local subscriptions or school fees. It may be worth noting that the Board agreed to pay the ploughman in Glasnevin £40 per annum in 1840 (12, 5 November 1840). By 1838, the Board had evolved its basic regulations as regards teacher employment and these continued to be core regulations during the following decades.

### BOOKS

A central part of the teachers' material and equipment was intended to be the books produced by the Board. Stanley's letter had urged the Board 'to exercise the most entire control over all books to be used in the schools' (11). Following the example of the Kildare Place Society, the Board proceeded to produce its own set of reading books. By April 1833, the first three reading books had been prepared (12, 18 April 1834). Carlile and MacArthur were the main authors, though the books had to have the unanimous approval of the whole Board. Books four and five followed in 1834 and 1835. By 1834, the Board had also produced a book on arithmetic, book keeping, a translation of a geometry book, and two selections of scripture readings (8). Before 1841, the Board had produced further books on grammar, the art of reading, a girls' reading book, a book on mensuration and one on needlework. It produced school slates, maps, stationery, and such requisites.

The Board did not compel schools to use its texts, although it retained the right to sanction any books being used. An important incentive for the purchase of the Board's books was that they could be made available for half price and, in September 1833, the Lord Lieutenant granted the Board's request to be allowed to give a basic school stock of books free of charge.

The Board organised its own publication unit, distinct from the Stationery Office. In November 1832, it appointed an official bookseller and book depositor. It also organised distribution through regional book depots and teachers benefited from a discount on the sale of text-books and school materials. The Board showed further initiative by appointing agents in 1836 for the sale of its books in London and Edinburgh, a move which was to prove very lucrative. As well as reading,

writing and arithmetic, the national schools at this time were to promote instruction in elements of history and geography, leading subjects of useful knowledge, as well as book keeping, geometry, surveying/mensuration, political economy, while girls were to be taught sewing or knitting (23) In the Report of 1840 the Board remarked

We attach much importance to the cultivation of vocal music as a branch of general education At an early period it was introduced into our Model Schools (20, p 87)

#### INSPECTORS

Important as it was to provide rules and regulations and various forms of assistance, it was also important for the Board to ensure that its intentions were being carried into effect at local level Accordingly, in May 1832, it advertised for four inspectors Having interviewed the candidates, the Board appointed Messers Sullivan, Robertson, Hamill, and Murray as the first four national school inspectors According to contemporary evidence, it was coincidental that two were Catholics and two were Protestants, though denominational balance was specifically borne in mind later Each was allotted the schools affiliated to the Board in one of the four provinces In August of the following year, four more inspectors were appointed Each of the eight was allocated four counties and given a salary of £300 per annum to include expenses Carlile remarked to the Commons Committee in 1837 that the selected men were

Gentlemen, men of respectable character, some are in preparation for the bar, one has been a respectable teacher and has had a respectable school (16, p 63)

At an early stage, the Board drew up standardized forms for inspectors' reports It also drew up instructions to guide the inspectors, and the first published list of institutions appeared in Appendix E of the Report for 1836 The instructions were specific and onerous Among them, it may be noted as reflecting favourably on the Board, was the following

In all his intercourse with the teachers, he will treat them with the most perfect kindness and respect, apprizing (sic) them privately of what he may see defective, and noting it to be reported to the Board, but by no means addressing them authoritatively or animadverting upon their conduct in the hearing of their scholars (23, p 51)

The inspectors were not to give advance notice of visits, 'but rather endeavour to arrive with each when he is not expected' In view of the fact that an inspector could only visit a school about once a year at that period, the 'catching out' element was adopted As the school system expanded and fears of non compliance with the regulations arose, a large development in the inspectorate took place in 1838 Ireland was divided into 25 inspectoral districts with new appointees taking up duty on February 1, 1838 It has been asserted that over 600 applicants applied for the new positions but it is not clear how the Board managed to do the large selection job (10) In any case, the inspector's title was now changed to superintendant and his salary was reduced to £125 with some added expenses This gave rise to dissatisfaction so that in 1840 it was raised to £200 per annum 'to include travelling expenses, stationery and all other charges whatsoever' (12, 24 December 1839) Thus, by 1841 the Board had established a countrywide network of inspectors, operating set procedures and now expected to visit the schools of their districts at least three times a year (14)

#### AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION

While one might consider that the Commissioners had their hands full in establishing the ordinary national school system they also took significant initiatives in agricultural education Stanley's letter had no specific reference to agricultural schooling but as early as 1832 the Board had agreed to give aid to two agricultural schools on an experimental basis (2) In his evidence to the Wyse Commission in August 1835, A R Blake spoke of the importance of pure agricultural schools but also of 'general instruction in gardening, and so on, in the garden which I propose to have annexed to each school' (17, p 360) Blake followed up on this by bringing forward a motion to the Board in November 1835 on 'the propriety of communicating with the Government upon the establishment of Agricultural Schools under the superintendence of the Commissioners' (12, 26 November 1835) The Board's request for the Lord Lieutenant's approval to obtain the old Foundling Hospital and its grounds for a Model Agricultural School was turned down by Drummond in early January 1836 He declared that 'it was the intention of the Government to try the experiment of agricultural schools through a distinct superintendence' (12, 7 January 1836) Blake was not deterred and got the Board's backing for his view when he raised the issue again in November 1836 A deputation met the Chief Secretary on November 21, 1836 and he agreed to back their moves on agricultural training (12,

24 November 1836 and 5 January 1837) A major outcome of this was the acquisition of the Glasnevin site for the model farm which opened in May 1838 This would provide a centre for the diffusion of agriculture and husbandry among the teaching body as well as a more rigorous training for a group of students specializing in agriculture, of whom there were 12 in 1839 (21)

This rather daring initiative of the National Board was motivated by concern about the condition of agriculture at the time and the very heavy dependence on it in rural Ireland The Commissioners stated

Considering the very backward state of agriculture in Ireland, and that it forms the only source of employment for a vast portion of the labouring poor, we think it particularly desirable that a better knowledge of it should be promoted and that the schools under us should tend, as far as practicable, to bring forward an intelligent class of farm labourers and servants (9, pp 62 63)

In this, the Irish Board reflected a general contemporary European movement in favour of agricultural education Small farms and farm labouring were the lot of the majority of the population The census of 1841 recorded that 82% of all holdings were between 1 and 15 acres An Agricultural Sub Committee of the Board was set up in 1840 In the same year, the Board brought forward a comprehensive plan for a more ambitious undertaking This was the establishment of 25 model agricultural schools throughout the country The Board also announced that it would give a more liberal salary to teachers who managed a school garden in the land attached to their ordinary elementary schools so that 'instruction will not only be given in the school-room but out of it – by lessons of example in skilful cultivation, industry and order' (20, pp 87 88), with an intended overspill to the adult population of the neighbourhood By 1843, five agricultural model schools had been established and grants awarded towards five more such schools Expansion continued so that by 1857 there were 165 institutions involved in agricultural education in association with the National Board (5, 10) It might also be noted that the Board gave support to the new workhouse schools established under the Poor Law legislation of 1839 It gave them initial stocks of schoolbooks gratis and other books at half price, while the Board's inspectors also visited these schools By 1842, the Board was assisting 68 workhouse schools (13)

## APPRAISAL AND ASPIRATIONS

Table 1 may help to draw together the central facts on the growth of the national school system over the decade of 1831-41. The number

TABLE 1

## NATIONAL SCHOOL PROVISION 1831-1841

	No of Schools	No of Pupils on Roll	Parliamentary Grant £
1831-34	789	107,042	112,500
1835	1,106	145,521	35,000
1836	1,181	153,707	50,153
1837	1,300	166,929	50,000
1838	1,384	169,548	50,000
1839	1,581	192,971	50,000
1840	1,978	232,560	50,000
1841	2,337	281,849	50,000

of national schools trebled between 1834 and 1841. The pace of increase was not too impressive between 1835 and 1838, due partly to the difficulties of coping with applications alluded to by Carlyle in evidence to a Commission of Inquiry in March 1837. The resolution of the problems of the Presbyterians as regards religious instruction in the late thirties helped to increase the momentum in later years.

It should be remembered that not all the national schools were built with the aid of the Board but all benefited from aid for current expenditure and were 'fitted up' by the Board, as the contemporary phrase put it. Table 1 also shows that, by 1841, well over a quarter of a million pupils were enrolled in national schools. Enrollment, however, was not synonymous with regular attendance in these pre-compulsory attendance days! Interestingly, almost half the pupils were girls. The drive for literacy and numeracy in English was underway and, as well as the benefits accruing to pupils in their home environments, these skills were also of great significance to those who emigrated. The parliamentary grant, which never matched the Board's expansion plans, settled at an annual rate of £50,000. In evaluating this annual figure, it should be borne in mind that the first government grant in aid of education in England, allocated

in 1833, amounted only to £20,000 and by 1846 it had only increased to £100,000 (3)

At certain periods, such as 1834 and 1837, the shortage of money held up grants and many applicants had to be kept on 'the long finger' (12, 13 February 1834) Carlile remarked to the Lords Committee in 1837, 'In consequence of the limited funds we have at our disposal we have not been able to receive new schools to any extent for the last two years' and went on to give striking expression to the frustration of applicants when he spoke of 'very many exceedingly urgent and exceedingly distressing complaints' (1, p 8) at delays. Even allowing for the Commissioners' inability to expand as fast as they would desire, the expansion in the number of schools and pupils is evidence of significant achievement.

As a Board, the Commissioners had the ability and courage to make decisions on many fronts and to implement them with some expedition. While establishing a bureaucratic structure with many rules and regulations, the Board did not allow red tape to become a straitjacket for itself. But, as well as the efficient, solid achievement we have charted and analysed, the Board also saw visions and dreamed dreams, as it envisioned schemes for greater development. The Commissioners dared to think big with what were very radical and probably unrealisable conceptions in contemporary circumstances. A notable instance of this was the ten year plan it detailed in 1835. This vision included a major training college with five professors offering a two-year course, a scheme of 32 model schools, one for each county, a fixed salary for teachers of £25 plus bonus, school fees, and apartments, and a scheme of 5,000 national schools. The estimated expenses for each year were laid out for all elements and they aggregated £2,147,000 over the ten years (19). As can be imagined, big spenders such as this caused considerable disquiet in Treasury circles and the Board had to be content with more modest progress.

In 1837, however, the Board brought forward an even more daring plan which, among other things, included the establishment of 25 district model schools and agricultural model schools and declared its intention of gradually dividing 'the National Schools, in general into two classes, the one to consist of primary, the other of secondary schools. The primary schools to afford elementary instruction, the secondary, scientific, and instruction also in manual occupations. A portion of land for garden husbandry was to be an indispensable adjunct to each secondary school, unless situated in a city or town. Instruction, however, in manual occupa

tions was to be encouraged in the primary schools also, and a female department to be annexed to each' (9, pp 63 63) It planned annual examinations in all the schools with prizes awarded to the most deserving children and scholarships for primary school children Though the Board got the support of the Chief Secretary for the scheme of district model schools, the schools did not begin until the following decade, while the other plans were not taken up, despite the considerable backing of the Wyse Commission Report of 1838 The Wyse Commission included people such as Stanley, Morpeth, Peel, O'Connell, More O'Farrell, Smith O'Brien, O'Connor Don, but the revolutionary scheme for Irish education imaged forth in that report was largely Wyse's own Wyse praised the work and administrative structure of the national school system and included it in his grand design for Irish schooling from infant schools up to a diverse third level education structure (17) The late 1830s were a heady time in Irish education circles While some of the new schemes can be seen as impracticable in the circumstances, to use Dr Johnson's phrase from another context, it would be a man of 'frigid philosophy who would be indifferent and unmoved' by the daring vision Other plans of the Board in the 1830s, such as the setting up of lending libraries for the general public attached to the schools, remained stillborn Though it may have shot for the stars and failed, the level of the National Board's achievement in its first decade is, I submit, impressive

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