

RICHARD LOVELL EDGEWORTH'S EDUCATION BILL OF 1799: A MISSING CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF IRISH EDUCATION

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In the spring following the rebellion of 1798 the Irish House of Commons considered and rejected a bill which contained a radical plan for the education of the poor in Ireland. It has been held by historians of Irish education that the contents of the bill were subsequently lost and that the reasons for its rejection would never be known. Recently, however, a draft of the bill has come to light amongst the Edgeworth family papers and it is here being published for the first time. From this, and from the report of the debate in the *Dublin Evening Post*, a missing piece of the history of Irish education can be reconstructed.

In the slow and difficult movement towards the establishment of a system of national education for Ireland, one of the pioneers was Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744-1817) father of Maria Edgeworth, the novelist. Most of his early years were spent in England where he associated with that circle of scientists, dissenters and industrialists which was known as the Lunar Society as it held its monthly meetings near the time of the full moon to make nocturnal travelling easier.† In this company he imbibed principles of empiricism, secularism and an inclination to challenge accepted ideas and to examine new and radical theories.

In the course of his life†† he married four times and the appearance of an increasing number of children led him to concern himself with the subject of education. After a brief flirtation with Rousseau, he decided to adopt a more pragmatic approach based on accurate child observation and experimentation. Priestley's edition of Hartley's *Observations on man* had made a great impression on him. By the use of the principles of association he set out to give education a scientific precision and he argued that it

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† For an account of this remarkable group of men cf. Schofield (11).

†† The primary source for Edgeworth's life in his *Memoirs* (6).

was possible to produce any type of character he chose by exercising as complete a control as possible on all the arbitrary, environmental influences that affect a child's life. His first wife died in 1773 and his second in 1780. It was therefore with his third wife that he returned to Ireland in 1782 where the instruction of the growing family continued. The results of more than twenty years' work were published in 1798 as *Practical education* written in collaboration with his daughter.

As a substantial landowner in County Longford it was natural that he should interest himself in politics and seek to enter the Irish House of Commons. He was not immediately successful as his radical views and religious toleration had not endeared him to his Anglo-Irish neighbours. Also he set out to create a model estate, run without bailiff or middleman, which was a standing reproach to a number of landlords in the country. But some were prepared to accept his undoubted honesty and he was elected member for St John's Town in February 1799.

On entering the Irish House of Commons, Edgeworth lost no time in becoming involved with education. More than ten years before, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Thomas Orde, and the Provost of Trinity College Dublin, John Hely-Hutchinson, had prepared a plan for a national education system which was put before the House in April 1787. After some hesitation it was approved but it was unacceptable to the catholic population (cf. 1, pp. 68 ff and 71-73). The death of the lord lieutenant soon afterwards and Orde's departure from office ensured that the plan was never re-considered. However, parliament's interest in the subject of education was maintained and in the following year a Board of Commissioners was set up to carry out a thorough investigation into the state of Irish education. They reported in 1791 and prepared some radical proposals which included the removal of the control of parish schools from the local protestant vicar into the hands of a body of lay managers including Roman catholics. Unfortunately the report was never published, nor was it ever presented to parliament*. On February 8th, 1799, soon after Edgeworth's arrival in the House, the Commons asked that the 1791 report be presented and that a committee be established to enquire into the state of education of the poorer classes and to suggest means for its improvement (1). There is little doubt that Edgeworth, with the authority of the 1798 *Practical education* behind him, was the leader of the movement to re-introduce the subject of education into the Irish parliament.

* Though unpublished, the report seems to have been available for consultation in draft form. Certainly it was used by the 1806 commissioners (1).

It appears that the first of the two requests was not complied with (1, p. 74, fn). If the 1791 report was too radical for publication at the time, the rising of 1798 with the consequent hardening of attitudes would not have made it more acceptable in 1799. Edgeworth himself led the committee that was set up in response to the second request and went to work with his customary expedition and vigour. In less than a month, on February 22nd, 1799, he addressed the House.

Mr Edgeworth reported from the Committee appointed to enquire into the State of the Education of the lower Order of the People and the Means of improving the same, the Resolutions which the Committee had directed him to report to the House, which he read in his Place, and afterwards delivered in at the Table, where the same were read, and are as follow:

1. *Resolved*, that it is the Opinion of this Committee, that the present State of the Education of the lower Order of the People in this Kingdom is highly defective, and requires the Interposition of the Legislature.

2. *Resolved*, that it is the Opinion of this Committee, that the establishing one or more Schools in every Parish or Union of Parishes in this Kingdom would be useful to the Public.

3. *Resolved*, that it is the Opinion of this Committee, that Masters for these Schools should undergo Examination, receive Certificates of their Morals and Abilities, and be Licensed annually.

4. *Resolved*, that it is the Opinion of this Committee, that the Payment of such Masters should consist partly of a fixed Salary and partly of Rewards proportioned to their Exertions and Success.

5. *Resolved*, that it is the Opinion of this Committee, that the Books permitted to be used in these Schools should be chosen by Persons appointed for that Purpose.

6. *Resolved*, that it is the Opinion of this Committee, that one or more Visitors should be empowered to inspect these and all other Parish Schools once in every year.

Resolved, that this House will on *Monday* next resolve itself into a Committee of the whole House to take the said Report into Consideration (10, p. 32).

The six resolutions contain nothing too radical and it is easy to see why the committee reported so quickly. Evidence for the first resolution was already to hand as a result of earlier enquiries, chief of which was the Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry in 1791 (reproduced in 2), and there was no need to conduct a full investigation. The second resolution was no more than yet another re-affirmation of an act of Henry VIII (28 Henry VIII, c. 15 of the Irish Parliament) which caused incumbents as part of their induction oath to swear to establish or cause to be established a school in their parish. The provisions of this act had been repeated by several subsequent pieces of legislation and the second resolution can be seen as part of this pattern.

The third, fourth, and sixth resolutions are really the kernel of the Report for they envisage a more structured and more controlled system of education than the one which obtained at the time. It is interesting to notice that they contain the germ of the ideas of teacher certification, payment by results, and regular school inspection. The resolution on the choice of books, dear to Edgeworth as can be seen in *Practical education*, was no doubt prompted by well-known reports of the kind of books currently to be found in some Irish schools*. The committee was asking, in fact, for a national system of education for the children of Ireland. The difficult question of religion is not mentioned except insofar as the schools are envisaged as being parochially organized. Those who saw the second resolution solely as an attempt to revive a forgotten law would see the schools as protestant and a means by which those catholics who attended them would be shown what the establishment would have called the error of their beliefs. But the resolution, although specifying that a school should be set up *in* every parish does not say that it should be set up *by* the parish. Indeed one could accept the resolution and argue for an interdenominational or even a catholic school. Whether or not the ambiguity was deliberate will never be known but it was enough to ensure the Report's ready acceptance.

The House twice debated the Report and concluded on February 26th by instructing Edgeworth and three other members to bring in a bill. The four men worked quickly and the bill was prepared in little more than a

* Hely Dutton (5, pp. 236-237) found a sample which included Ovid's *Art of Love*, *Moll Flanders*, *History of witches and apparitions* and *A history of Fair Rosamund and Jane Shore, two prostitutes*. Though this somewhat extreme example is later than the date of the Report, it reflects a situation which must have been familiar to Edgeworth and his colleagues.

month. It fell to Edgeworth once again to stand up in the House on March 28th and report the results of his own and his colleagues' labours. It was, however, labour in vain for, though a second reading was ordered for the following day, the House was counted out and references to it disappear from the Journals.

Though Edgeworth's speech introducing the bill was fully reported in the *Dublin Evening Post* of April 2nd 1799, no draft has so far been discovered. But in the Edgeworth family papers there are some sheets headed 'A Bill for the improvement of the education of the lower orders of people in this kingdom', dated 1799. This document is reproduced in full at the end of this paper.*

That the draft was the one actually presented to parliament can be seen by comparing it with the newspaper account and the earlier Report of Edgeworth's committee. In the account of his speech in the *Dublin Evening Post* he is stated to have said:

He had intended, if the forms of the House had permitted, to propose an additional tax on all licenses [sic] for distillers, and by this means to make the vices of the parents contribute ultimately to the advantage of their children. If the Minister would appropriate, for this purpose, one tenth of the surplus of the window tax and game licenses, he would be amply satisfied (4).

In the draft there is a cancelled section referring to a proposed tax on liquor licences. Also the opening words of the draft echo the phraseology of the first resolution of the Report.

If, as seems likely, this was the Bill put before the Irish House of Commons on 28th March 1799, then what Edgeworth and his colleagues were proposing was nothing less than the establishment of a national system of education for the poor of Ireland, regardless of faith. Its most radical proposal, which even went beyond the recommendations of the 1791 Report, was for the establishment of catholic schools with catholic teachers appointed by catholic priests.

Though later commissions of education (cf. particularly 8, 9) came out strongly against separate education for protestant and catholic children,

* I have the permission of Mrs Christina Edgeworth Colvin for its publication.

arguing that it was divisive, and proposed instead common general education with separate religious instruction, the proposal for state-aided catholic schools was revolutionary. Until 1782, when Gardiner's act repealed the earlier penal laws, it was illegal for catholic teachers to teach catholic children (cf. 1, p. 44). Even Gardiner's act prohibited the endowment of any catholic educational foundation in Ireland and required every catholic teacher to obtain a licence from the anglican bishop of the diocese. This last requirement was abolished in 1792 and in the Relief Act of 1793 all penalties on catholic teachers were withdrawn. But the prohibition of catholic endowments remained on the statute book at the time of Edgeworth's bill, despite the foundation of Maynooth College in 1795, when the Irish parliament decided to forget its own laws in the interests of expediency. The 1799 bill was thus a bold attempt to obtain for the catholics of Ireland an educational system of which they could approve and the establishment of schools to which, in conscience, they could send their children. As Edgeworth is reported as having said:

The happiness, the tranquillity, not only of the lower orders, but of all ranks, all descriptions of people in Ireland, depend upon the amelioration of our national education ... In a war of opinions, it must inevitably be the *mind* that will decide the victory ... Not with all the treasure which our enormous increase of taxation throws into the hands of our Executive Government, can you devise any new system of coercion from which we can flatter ourselves with permanent security, until the *minds* of the people are, by proper instruction, medicined to repose (4).

Edgeworth was hoping that the memories of the rebellion of 1798 might be fresh enough to shake the government into action, if only for the sake of expediency, as happened in the case of Maynooth College.

But the bill was quickly dropped. Edgeworth consoled himself with the knowledge that he had made an attempt.

The honour of having proposed a plan of National Education would be his — all the obloquy of rejecting it would fall on Ministers (4).

Akenson (1, p. 75) suggests that the reason for its demise was the pre-occupation of parliament with the proposed Union with England but Edgeworth, according to the *Dublin Evening Post*, had been given private intimation from 'a gentleman of influence in this House' that the bill was doomed. He was prevented in honour, the newspaper account goes on to say, from repeating publicly a private conversation but it appears, from the emphasis which Edgeworth laid in his speech on finance, that he was

told that money could not be made available at a time of national emergency when priority must be given to matters of defence. This Edgeworth could not accept.

... the Public would hardly believe that the sum wanted for the immediate purpose of this bill could be an object of such mighty concern to a Government that had boasted with such enthusiasm of the resources of the nation (4).

The reasons given by the Chancellor of the Exchequer for dropping the bill, as reported by the *Dublin Evening Post*, were:

that the present distracted state of the country was such, that the public money was scarcely equal to the public exigencies, and that in every point of view it would be politic to defer the execution of such a plan till times of more tranquility, when Government should have more leisure and more power to complete a scheme of National Education (4).

Words similar to these have greeted many attempts at social reform, both before and since 1799, and perhaps the real reason for the bill's disappearance is that the government was not yet ready to envisage an organized national system of education which would contain catholic schools whose teachers had been appointed by catholic priests. Also, it must be admitted, the catholics of Ireland may not have been ready to send their children to a school, even though run by a catholic teacher, that had come into being as part of a national system. Catholic 'hedge-schools' flourished well into the nineteenth century, even after the establishment of a national system in 1831 (cf 1, 3); no doubt, the mistrust caused by the penal laws, which had only comparatively recently been repealed, did not evaporate overnight.

Nevertheless this does not diminish Edgeworth's achievement. Within days of taking up his seat in the House he became a leader and a spokesman on educational matters. He introduced the subject of education to the House for the first time in four years and he won over his committee to some far-reaching proposals. It could be said with justice that he contributed towards the general climate of enlightenment that enabled Ireland to have a national system of education nearly forty years before one was established in England.

It is a pity that Edgeworth is now remembered in Ireland mainly for the unfortunate letter which he appended to the Third Report of the Commissioners of the Board of Education in Ireland (7, p. 478) defending the

notorious Charity Schools. It is the only action of his that is mentioned by Corcoran and we will never know the real reasons for such untypical behaviour. For Richard Lovell Edgeworth devoted his life to the improvement of the people of his country and his concern for its children and for their education deserves a more worthy memorial.

Text of

DRAFT OF EDUCATION BILL PRESENTED TO THE
IRISH HOUSE OF COMMONS IN APRIL 1799

A Bill for the improvement of the education of the lower orders of people in this kingdom —

Whereas, the state of the education of the lower orders of the people in this kingdom is materially defective and requires the interposition of parliament Be it enacted

That one or more schools with a house for the residence of the master, or mistress thereof may be erected, in manner hereafter mentioned, in every parish or union of parishes in this kingdom for the education of children in such parish or union in reading, writing, arithmetic, mensuration, and such other things as may be suited to their several destinations, and capacities; and for the instruction of the said children in husbandry, gardening, planting; in plain-work, knitting, weaving of lace, and other useful occupations, according to their different sexes, and ages. [*In another hand*] And be it further Enacted that in case the Board of First fruits shall be enabled by Parliament they shall apply in such manner as they shall think proper such sum or sums of money as shall appear to them necessary in —

[*cancelled section*]

And in order to create a fund for building such school houses be it enacted that on every license, which shall be granted throughout [the] Kingdom for the sale of spirituous liquor there shall be paid, over and above the sum required by law, a further sum of ten shillings to the collector of the revenue of the district, & the receipt therefore certified on the back or at the foot of the certificate before any license shall be issued, every which sum of ten shillings shall be paid over by the Commissioner [?] Receiver General of his Majesty's revenue, to the Board of first fruits, to be by them applied in such manner as they shall think proper

[*end of cancelled section*]

in building school houses, including accomodation [sic] for the master or mistress, for the purposes of this act, not exceeding £100 for any one school house as aforesaid —

Provided always – that no such school house shall be erected in any place by the said Board of First fruits except where a grant shall have been made of one acre of ground at the least, in perpetuity, to the said Board of First fruits, for the site, and accomodation [sic] of such school – Every which grant of one acre of ground to be void unless a schoolhouse shall be built thereon within two years after the making of said grant – And provided that in case such school house shall remain unoccupied as a school house for five or more scholars for the space of five years that then, and thereafter the said land, and the buildings thereon shall revert to the [use] of the possessor of said lands, or to his or their legal representative forever, upon repayment to the Board of First Fruits of one half of the original cost of said buildings – Be it further enacted – That where a school for the education of Protestants [or of Catholics – cancelled] only, or of Protestant, and Catholic children conjointly, be erected, the master or mistress of said school shall be appointed annually by the protestant clergyman of said parish or union of parishes under a certificate of good character, and capacity, from two justices of the Peace of the county where the said parish or union of parishes is situate, & of five freeholders of said County –

And in case – the said school shall be intended for the education of Catholic children only, then the master or mistress of said school shall be appointed annually at Easter by the Catholic clergyman of said parish or union of parishes, under the certificate for good behaviour, and capacity of two magistrates & of five freeholders of said County –

And for the encouragement and support of the masters, or mistresses of said schools; that a salary not exceeding seven pounds per annum at the least, shall be paid by the said Board of First fruits to the master of each of said schools, or to the mistress thereof if a mistress only shall be appointed thereto –

And the further sum of five pounds for every twenty children who shall appear by the oath of the said master or mistress to have attended such school in the preceding year for three hours at the least, in each day during 150 days at the least within such year, to be assessed on the said parish or union at any Vestry, and to be levied in the same manner as other parish Cesses, by the church-wardens of said parish or union –

And be it further enacted – that for the space of five years no books shall be used in said schools, but such as shall have been previously approved of by persons appointed for that purpose by the Lord Lieutenant for the time being –

provided always — that no master or mistress of any catholic school shall be required to use any book in his or her school which shall be disapproved of by the majority of the catholic clergy of the county where he or she resides —

[The above paragraph has a thick line drawn through it. It is impossible to say whether this indicates a cancellation or whether the line was made by accident. Certainly in other cancelled passages in this draft bill there is no doubt of the authors' intentions. Every line is scored through, sometimes quite heavily. Also, in these cases, the cancelled passage is followed by a substitute which has not happened in this instance.]

[In another hand — heavily altered]

And be it enacted that all tenants for life with rem^d to the first & other Sons in tail shall & are hereby empowered to make fee farm Grants or leases in perpetuity to the Board of First Fruits of any quantity of Ground not exceeding one acre at a peppercorn rent for the purposes aforesaid — which fee farm Grant & Lease or leases the Board of First Fruits shall & are hereby empowered to take for building & erecting the school house or houses[.]

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