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Education without the State – British private and charitable schooling in the 19th century and beyond

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Education without the state has a bad image. It is provided above all, as so often with bad images of the 19th century, by Charles Dickens. In *Nicholas Nickleby* he turns his attention to schooling and claims that he is describing the sort of conditions that actually existed in a part of Yorkshire.

The young man Nicholas Nickleby becomes an assistant teacher and is appalled by what he finds in Dotheboys Hall. As he looked at the children who he is meant to teach,

How the last traces of hope, the remotest glimmering any good to be derived from his efforts in this den faded from the mind of Nicholas as he looked in dismay around! Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meagre legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together; there were the bleared eye, the har -lip, the corked foot and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offspring, or of young lives, which, from the earliest dawn of infancy had been on horrible endurance of cruelty and neglect... and so on for some time. Continuing later,

...What an incipient Hell was breeding here!

It is indeed a Hell that Dickens goes on to describe - of cruelty and greed perpetrated by this school and the apparently 'unnatural' parents.

In *Oliver Twist*, of course, the hero is born in a poor house and treated with utter cruelty.

Then there is the ghastly teacher Gradgrind in *Hard Times*.

Dickens is the most read author of the 19th century. I love his works, especially *Christmas Carol*.

But taking Dickens as a reliable source for understanding conditions in the 19th century - as many people do, who know no better - is as absurd as taking *Harry Potter* as an accurate guide to contemporary schools in Britain.

First, let us not forget the simple fact that Dickens was writing fiction. Second, in the case of *Nicholas Nickleby*, people in Yorkshire were so outraged by his calumny against the county that in the second preface, Dickens withdrew and said that he understood that such places no longer existed. It is pretty clear that no such place ever existed at all. Thirdly, Dickens was always writing about England at

an earlier time in the 19th century. As we shall see, education changed drastically in that amazing century. To talk about education in, say, 1810 is utterly different to talking about it in 1880. They are like two different countries.

What was non-state schooling really like in the 19th century? Just how bad or good was it? How many children were included? How many were left out - and with what effect on their lives?

If it really was not bad, why would anyone have bothered to bring in schooling by the state?

Let us start with that last question, which will lead to the others. Why did anyone feel the need to create state schooling if private schooling was fine?

The basic answer to this question is: ,they didn't intend to'.

State schooling - as it now exists - was never intended by those who set the ball rolling. State schooling in Britain is like a car which set out from Hannover to Berlin and ended up in Peking. When the car set off, no one had the slightest desire to go to Peking. They would have been positively horrified at the idea of going so far and passionately against it. They only wanted to go to Berlin. But what they did led to developments they had not expected or intended which, in turn, led people to do other things which also had unexpected consequences. Through ,a series of unfortunate events' the overwhelming state monopoly of today was created.

How did this series of events begin?

At the very beginning, in 1833, the first government grants were made to charitable church schools. The idea was simply to give a bit of help. But a principle had been established. The state could ,help out' in education.

The next step, in 1839, was the appointment of inspectors to examine schools. After all, if government money was going to be spent on particular schools, then of course the schools had to be suitable places for the money to go. How were you to know if the schools were worthy of help without inspections? Taxpayer's money was at stake. It would - so it must have been thought - be irresponsible not to have inspectors. (Inspectors, incidentally, of course only make their jobs meaningful if they divide schools into those that are worthy and those that are not. They therefore have a vested interest in describing some schools as not good enough. Already the idea that parents are not qualified to decide such an issue had arisen back in 1839.)

But all this did not change things very much.

The big step change happened in 1870 with W.E. Forster's Elementary Education Act. This empowered local boards to create elementary school to ,fill up gaps' in independent provision. It was through this act that the charabanc decisively left Hannover and set out on what was meant to be a relatively short journey. But it was a journey that ended up arriving at an educational revolution.

W.E. Forster was an unlikely revolutionary. Married to the daughter of Dr Thomas Arnold, the archetypal Victorian head of a private school, he was M.P. for Bradford and Vice-President of the Education Department in Gladstone's Government. But W.E. Forster - no one seems to use his first name - nonetheless stood up in the House of Commons in 1870 and announced the beginning of this revolution.

Was Forster - like Aneurin Bevan in healthcare - a passionate rebel who wanted to tear down privilege and destroy the bourgeois establishment? Not exactly.

He introduced state education with great caution - even concern. He verged on being reluctant about it. He said, „we must take care *not* to destroy...the existing system". There should be „the *utmost* endeavour not to injure existing and efficient schools" (my emphasis).

They would be surprising words for someone who wanted a revolution. But the point is that he didn't. On the contrary, he was worried about possible ill-effects deriving from the state's involvement - quite rightly, as events have subsequently shown.

He said he did not want that the state's involvement to cause parents „to neglect their children". He insisted that the money should not come from central government. „Consider... the enormous power it would give the central administration," he warned.

He wanted parents to keep on contributing to the cost, asking, „why should we relieve the parent from all payments for the education of his child?... the enormous majority of them are able...to pay these fees." Nevertheless, he acknowledged that under „special circumstances" in places of „*exceeding* poverty" (my emphasis), local authorities should have power to create free schools. In general though, he wanted to keep „the present proportions - namely of one-third raised from the parents, one-third out of the public taxes, and one third out of local funds [either charity or local rates]".

The law he brought forward allowed the creation of state schools. Its purpose

was not to wipe out the existing, private and charitable schools but „to complete the present voluntary system, to fill up gaps“.

So the politician who began the process which resulted in the gradual destruction of the vast majority of independent schools had no intention of doing any such thing. He did not want to displace independent and charitable schools, only to complement them. He would have been appalled by how his own law and the further „logical next steps“, taken by people like Lloyd George, Winston Churchill and R.A.B. Butler created schools that were dominated by central government and were free to all.

the „gaps“

What were „the gaps“ that Forster said he wanted to fill? How many children were not going to school before the state decided to create its own schools?

That is rather like asking „where is the bullet“ at a moment between when a gun is fired and the moment when the bullet hits something. The bullet of education in the 19th century was moving so fast, it is hard to be sure where it was at any given moment.

Observers in the 19th century remarked with awe at the speed at which education for the poor was expanding. A Select Parliamentary Committee reported in 1817:

There is the most unquestionable evidence that the anxiety of the poor for education continues not only unabated but daily increasing; that it extends to every part of the country, and is to be found equally prevalent in those smaller towns and country districts, where no means of gratifying it are provided by the charitable efforts of the richer classes.ⁱ

In the first comprehensive survey, it was found that about seven per cent of the entire population, including all adults, were being schooled in 1818. Only 10 years later, Henry Brougham did a follow up survey and was astonished to find that the number of pupils had doubled.

i Quoted E.G.West *op cit*.

Numbers at school	
1818	478,000
1834	1,294,000
1851	2,144,378
1858	2,535,462

Sources: 1820 select committee, 1835 parliamentary survey, 1851 Registrar General, 1861 Newcastle Commissionⁱⁱ.

Of course, the population of Britain was rising too. Allowing for that, the proportion of the entire population which was at school rose from seven per cent in 1818 to 13 per cent in 1858 - a near doubling in forty years. Education was taking off like a rocket - and this was all happening when there were no state schools.

Proportion of entire population at school	
1818	7%
1838	8.3%
1851	11.9%
1858	13%

Sources: 1820 select committee, 1838 select committee, 1851 Registrar General, 1861 Newcastle Commissionⁱⁱⁱ.

It is no exaggeration to say that the first half of the century saw an explosion of schooling and that it took place with very little involvement of the state. As Professor E.G.West - a superb writer on the history of British education - remarked,

When the government made its debut in education in 1833 mainly in the role of a subsidiser it was as if it jumped into the saddle of a horse that was already galloping.^{iv}

Where, then, had this galloping horse reached by 1870? The Newcastle Commission in 1861^v sought to discover how many children were at school and then

ii E.G.West *op. cit.*

iii *Ibid.*

iv *Ibid*, page173.

v Some historians have taken Forster's estimates in 1870 but these were based on a statistical error which was exposed in *Education and the State op cit* pages 181-184 and again in James Tooley's *Education without the State* (IEA 1996).

estimate what percentage of all children must be receiving schooling. The figure the commissioners came to was 95.5 per cent.

Even this impressive figure may have been an underestimate. Elsewhere in the research was evidence that children spent slightly less time at school than the Commission had assumed.^{vi} If the average time spent at school was less but numbers at school were the same, a higher proportion of children must have been to school than the Commission had estimated: virtually 100 per cent^{vii}.

Numbers at school, though, tell only half the story. Were the children learning? Perhaps the schools were all Dickensian horror stories, imposing sadistic discipline and misery in dreadful condition.

Here is a report:

We noted the grim approaches...rubbish dumps on waste land nearby; the absence of green playing spaces on or near the school sites; tiny play grounds; gaunt looking children; often poor decorative conditions inside; narrow passages; dark rooms...books kept unseen in cupboard for lack of space to lay them out...and sometime all around, the ingrained grime of generations.

For some people, this will confirm their worst suspicions about education in the nineteenth century. However, I have copied a little trick (formerly played by Professor West). The above is paragraph 133 of the Plowden Report of 1967 about state schools. It is a reminder - including to myself - of two things. First, that we

vi Just under six years.

vii Forster's civil servants assumed that children should be educated from 8 to 13. They estimated how many children there were in Manchester, for example, who were in that age bracket. They estimated there were 80,000 of them. They then discovered how many children were actually in school in Manchester and found that only 60,000 were at school. They therefore concluded that 20,000 children were not at school. The flaw in this analysis lay in the arbitrary assumption that children should be at school from 5 to 13 - a total of eight years - when in fact, as the Newcastle Commission had discovered, children on average spent 5.7 years at their schooling. One may guess that by 1870, that average had reached six years. If that is right, then the number of children who should have been at school for 100% attendance was not the total number of children aged between 5 and 13 but only six eighths of that number, i.e. 60,000 pupils. That in fact is the number who were at school. So Forster wrongly informed the House of Commons that 25 per cent of children in Manchester were getting no schooling whereas his own raw data - without incorrect assumptions - suggested that 100 per cent of them were getting some schooling. This may have been an exaggeration. But it was nearer the truth than the wildly inaccurate scare story which he told other MPs. E.G. West op. cit.

often cling to prejudices like a child to its mother. Second, that one should never to rely too much on a single anecdote.

Bearing that in mind, here, nonetheless, is an anecdote about a school that really was placed squarely in the mid-19th century. What sort of place was this?

The Reverend Richard Dawes was a fellow of Downing College in Cambridge who might have hoped to become the Master. Unfortunately, he was passed over, so instead he became the vicar of King's Somborne, a village of 1,125 people in Hampshire^{viii}.

There was no school there, so he set about creating one. He persuaded the lady of the manor to donate a site. To create a building, Dawes contributed £500 of his own money - a considerable sum in those days - and obtained a matching grant from the government.

But he wanted the school to become self-supporting. He insisted that the parents, many of whom were far poorer than almost any parents today, all had to pay - and promptly at that. He believed that people do not value what they do not pay for. The amount they paid varied according to their circumstances. Labourers were charged a few pence a week while those who earned higher wages were charged six to ten shillings a quarter - which must have been about four times as much. The school opened with 38 children but quickly grew. By the end of the fourth year, it had 158 pupils.

What did the school teach? Dawes followed his own ideas and others he had picked up from reading Rousseau and William Cobbett. If parents liked what he produced, he had a school. If not, it would collapse. (Parent power ruled, not inspector power or central power.)

They clearly liked his regime which was like this: the children were taught reading as a beginning. He tried to make this pleasurable and relevant to their lives. They had to write down the names of their brothers and sisters and all the things in their house and the names of the birds, trees and plants they knew. To help them practice writing, they were asked to write about the food used in their homes, about animals, agricultural equipment, the River Test nearby, the neighbouring town, Stockbridge, the sun, the moon and the stars. As soon as they had

viii All the material about King's Somborne comes from *An Introductory History of English Education since 1800* by S.J. Curtis and M.E.A. Boulwood (University Tutorial Press 1960)

mastered reading, they were introduced to the finest poetry and prose in the English language.

To teach history he took his pupils to the Roman road from Old Sarum to Winchester. He gave special attention to the way people lived at different periods - what sort of houses they had, what they ate and how they were clothed.

He taught nature through the direct observation of local plants and trees, the study of birds and of their migration. Under the supervision of the assistant master, the pupils kept records of barometric pressure and temperature. They kept a journal in which they recorded events such as the arrival of the first swallow, the coming of the cuckoo, the earliest pear and apple blossom and the first ears of wheat or barley.

Dawes wrote about his method,

A teacher may talk to them about a thermometer, and find in the end, they just know as much about it as they did when he began; but if he shows them one, and then grasps it in his hand, telling them to look at the fluid as it rises, or plunges it into hot or cold water, and lets them see the effect, they then begin to open their eyes in a wonderful manner

In mathematics the older boys learnt algebra and the subject matter of the first three books of Euclid. Again they used actual objects known to them - surveying the land around them and measuring in a carpenter's shop. Dawes proudly wrote:

Writing in my study, I heard a noise of joyous voices, which I found proceeded from half-a-dozen boys, who after school hours, had come to measure my garden-roller.

They wanted to practise calculating the weight of a cylinder using measurements of the size and knowledge of the specific gravity of the material from which it was made.

King's Somborne, in the 1840s, gave instruction and encouraged inquiry. It was a kind of school which one might wish one's own children could attend.

Of course, King's Somborne was one of the best. No one would pretend its standards were run of the mill. But it is an excellent antidote to the impression that many have of 19th schools from Dickens' melodramatic depictions of the worst imaginable ones in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Hard Times*. King's Somborne

was exceptionally good and real, whereas Dotheby's Hall was exceptionally bad and fictional.

There were all sorts of schools that sprung up in that explosion of education between 1818 and 1848. There were, of course, very many Anglican schools, funded by the established church and its supporters. There were Quaker schools such as Ackworth where the Friends Provident society had its origins. There were purely commercial schools - 3752 of them in 1844 according to 1851 census^x.

Something like a quarter of all working class children at elementary school attended private schools - schools outside the control of any church^x. Phil Gardner, who has rescued such schools from historical invisibility, passionately describes how working class parents often chose them because they were flexible and responsive to their wishes. The children spent their time on subjects which the parents wanted rather than being taught what their upper middle-class „superiors“ thought was good for them. The parents, being poor, sometimes needed their children at different times of day or year. The school would accommodate needs instead of scolding them. The parents did not feel patronised or resentful. Education was something they showed their commitment to by paying. But education was under their own control. There was a „close cultural link between home and school which the public [government] system sought to break down“^{xi}.

Some of these establishments were „dame schools“ which date from at least as far back as 1742. Women would take children into their homes and, for a few pence each, would teach them. Standards varied of course. Some modern historians are dismissive of dame schools, basing their scorn largely on the comments of professional educationalists of the 19th century. But the 19th century officials condemned them for not teaching middle-class morality, failing to teach much beyond the three R's and for having modest premises. They were sometimes impressed, however, by the effectiveness of the actual teaching. One official remarked in the Newcastle Commission report of 1861, „I very much doubt if any public [government supported] school could teach [reading] so quickly as was done in some small schools of the class which I visited.“^{xii}

ix *E.G. West op cit* page 175.

x *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England* by Phil Gardner, Croom Helm 1984.

xi *Ibid*.

xii *Ibid* page 171, quoting from Newcastle Commission report vol2, p227, Winder.

There were also the so-called Ragged Schools. They began with John Pounds, a Portsmouth cobbler who was concerned about the very poorest boys in his neighbourhood^{xiii}. He tempted them into his workshop, so the story goes, with hot potatoes, and taught them reading while continuing at his work. Many similar efforts took place around the country and they came to be known, collectively, as the Ragged Schools. Lord Shaftesbury took the spontaneous movement under his wing in 1843 and by 1849 there were 82 Ragged Schools with 8,000 pupils. They were taught by over 1,000 teachers, of whom nearly nine out of ten did the work without payment. Twenty years later, the number of such schools had multiplied. There were 204 day school, 207 evening ones and 226 Sunday schools. They had 26,000 pupils of all ages.

The birth pangs of a ragged school, by Charles Dickens.

„The pupils...sang, fought, danced, robbed each other - seemed possessed by legions of devils. The place was stormed and carried, over and over again; the lights were blown out, the books strewn in the gutters, and the female scholars carried off triumphantly to their old wickedness. With no strength in it but its own purpose, the school stood it all out, and made its way. Some two years since I found it quiet and orderly, full, lighted with gas, well whitewashed, numerously attended, and thoroughly established.“^{xiv}

Dickens was documenting an actual school, not a fictional one.

Sunday schools were widespread and the various sects of Christianity had their own. Aneurin Bevan went to one.

There were schools based on a system of teaching used by Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster. Bell was a missionary in India where there was a shortage of teachers. To overcome the problem, he used senior pupils to teach junior ones. When he returned to England he wrote pamphlets describing his work. Meanwhile Joseph Lancaster started a private school in Southwark, London. He used a similar method, deploying pupils as teachers, whom he called monitors, to teach and do much of the administration. In this way, teaching could spread from a single adult to many pupils at a low cost.

xiii *A History of English Elementary Education* by Frank Smith (University of London Press 1931)

xiv Quoted in Frank Smith, *op cit*, page 202. No date is given for Dickens' words.

Another kind of education started at Glasgow university in 1760^{xv}. Professor Anderson began to hold evening classes which he encouraged working men to attend. The idea was more fully developed by a successor of his, George Birkbeck. He was lecturing on medicine and needed local artisans to help with the apparatus. He found the men so intelligent and eager to learn that he started lectures in mechanics „solely for persons engaged in the practical exercise of the mechanical arts“. The experiment proved successful. „For three successive seasons I had the gratification of lecturing to 500 mechanics. An audience more orderly, attentive, and apparently comprehending I never witnessed“ he reported^{xvi}. The idea spread across the country so that by 1851 there were 610 Mechanics Institutes with a membership of 600,000. The London Mechanics Institute later developed into Birkbeck College and became part of London University.

This is not the end of the extraordinary diversity and growth of education in the 19th century. Education at home, or self-education, is another subject in itself. It was important for several people already described in this book - Aneurin Bevan and Thomas Chalmers among those mentioned so far.

There were, of course, some bad schools. Some inspectors wrote scornful accounts of such places. But the litmus test of education is the outcome. Could the great mass of people read and write before the state took over?

could they read?

The Council on Education wanted an answer to the very same question in 1840. An assessment was made on its behalf of the literacy of miners in the coal fields of Northumberland and Durham. It was found that a large majority of them, 79 per cent, could read while just over half, 53 per cent, could also write^{xvii}.

A survey was made 15 years later of men in the marines and the navy which showed that 80 per cent of the marines who had been educated a decade or two earlier and 89 per cent of the seamen could read^{xviii}. But of the boys newly recruited out of school 99 per cent could read. Literacy was bounding ahead.

xv *A History of English education* from 1760 *op cit*.

xvi Quoted in *An Introductory History of English Education op cit* page 319.

xvii E.G.West *op. cit.*

xviii R.K.Webb *The Victorian Reading Public* in *From Dickens to Hardy* (Pelican 1963), quoted in E.G.West *op. cit.*

Ability to read was always in advance of ability to write because, at the time, reading was useful and pleasurable whereas writing was not necessary for most occupations which were still manual.

But the ability to write was catching up fast, all the same. In 1840, half the women who got married in England and Wales signed the register with a mark rather than a signature^{xix}. By 1870 the figure was down to 27 per cent and by 1891 it had fallen to only 7.3 per cent. For men, the figures fell similarly so that by 1891 only 6.4 per cent were signing with a mark. Men on average married at the age of 28 and left school at 11, so the vast majority of those signing in 1891 would not have been affected by Forster's Act. This was a nation racing towards literacy.

Could people read in the 19th century?

Tom Paine's The Rights of Man, published in 1803, sold one and half million copies. William Cobbett's Address to the Journeymen and Labourers sold 200,000 copies in only two months. His writings „were read on nearly every cottage hearth in the manufacturing districts of South Lancashire“^{xx}. Serialised fiction such as the works of Dickens, sold in huge numbers and regular reading of the Bible at home was traditional and widespread.

If the „galloping horse“ of independent education in the nineteenth century had been allowed to continue its charge, we might by now have schooling in Britain of an extremely high standard. The willingness of ordinary working people to purchase education was demonstrated by the extraordinary growth in schooling and literacy in the 19th century. Britain is a vastly richer country than it was in 1870 so it is all but certain that the massive increase in wealth would have produced a major development of the extent and quality of schooling.

Yes, there were „gaps“ when Forster proposed the law which was to transform British education. But they were relatively small and closing fast.

Forster's Act was not meant to interfere with the rapid growth of independent education. It was meant to preserve charitable and private education while

xix David Glass, 'Education and Social Change in Modern England' in *Education, Economy and Society* ed. A.H.Halsey, quoted in E.G.West *op. cit.*

xx Samuel Bamford, „the weaver poet“, quoted by Mr H.J.Perkins in *History Today* July 1957 p426, quoted in turn by E.G.West *op cit.*

allowing local government schooling for any children who might be left out. The almost complete take-over by the state which happened subsequently was not what Forster and parliament intended. In fact it would have horrified them. True, there were some people who wanted full-scale state education. But others, too, were against even the early stages of the state's involvement.

Edward Baines wrote a book called *Education Best Promoted By Perfect Freedom, Not By State Endowments*^{xxi}. He thought the state would take away the „happy social influence“ of the churches and benevolent individuals. Parents would lose influence over their own children. He warned that state enterprises were inefficient and developed large bureaucracies which would waste time and money. He suggested that the state would settle on particular ways of teaching which would mean a lack of valuable innovation and flexibility. He suggested that teachers' salaries would eventually be reduced. The Government would be generous to begin with, he asserted, but such largesse would not last.^{xxii}

xxi Published by John Snow, Leeds, „Price Sixpence“.

xxii This is a more complete list:

1. „The duty of educating being assumed by the State, it is of course taken off from the parent, who thereby loses one of his most sacred responsibilities and with it loses...influence [over his child]“.
2. The religious bodies and benevolent citizens who then sponsored education would also lose their „happy social influence“.
3. Responsibility would move, instead, to a set of „political officers“ including some who do their work „perfunctorily and heartlessly for the mere sake of the salary“. State enterprises were inefficient and „nests of jobbing“.
4. The centre would not be able to keep real control of so many schools, so power would go to inspectors who would become like „little despots“ dictating to school committees and headmasters.
5. One uniform system of tuition would dominate. Nothing could be more harmful to future improvements. There would be „stereo-typed school-books“ and „invention of new methods would cease“. It would be „inflexible“.
6. Salaries for teachers would be reduced. The Government felt generous towards education at that time, but the salaries of government servants in Post Offices, for example, were a warning.
7. Enormous bureaucracies would be created to direct education, „resembling the bureaucracies of the Continent“. Such an increase in government activity and patronage „is scarcely consistent with free institutions“.
8. The Government would have the power to mould „the religious and political opinions of the people - not a very fit thing for a great and free nation, nor compatible with its intellectual independence“.
9. Religion would be excluded altogether or only one sect would be taught or every sect would be taught. Each of these possibilities was objectionable.
10. If such things also extended to further and higher education, the objections listed above would be „greatly aggravated and multiplied“.

Baines was not the only one to be against the state take-over. Thomas Daniels, had charge of St Paul's Church of England Schools in Manchester. The Manchester School Board wanted to take over his schools since they were „not flourishing“. Daniels angrily replied that their difficulties were due to the actions of the board itself which had acquired a Jewish school in the same road and lowered its fees to below those of St Paul's^{xxiii} His schools were not alone in suffering from this predatory pricing. The Wesley School, in the same area was also „not flourishing“ due to the same „unfair competition“. Members of Christian churches had made „great sacrifices of time and money to erect schools“ he said. They were now also taxed as ratepayers in addition to supporting their religious schools with money. He refused to hand over his schools to the board because it would be „a breach of trust“. The schools were „subscribed for as Church of England Schools and the trust deed sets forth the same object“. It was a brave, principled stand. But hundreds of independent schools were being wiped out or taken over in this way. The state increasingly took over assets built up over years by charitable and private schools. The local boards of education gradually destroyed independent schooling except for the rich.

Even one of the school inspectors regretted „the disappearance of different and interesting types of school, adapted to the varied social requirements and religious convictions of different classes“^{xxiv}

From 1880, education was made compulsory. This meant all the more pressure to make state schooling cheap and, ultimately, free. The history of British education is truly of one thing leading to another.

The story of education told in this chapter is an extraordinary one. Until 1870, all schooling was provided by independent schools and universities. Virtually every child had five to seven years schooling. The amount and quality of instruction was improving by leaps and bounds. Then parliament passed a law intended only to „fill up gaps“ in independent provision. But this new law - quite against the wishes of the man who proposed it - led, over the following 74 years, to the almost complete destruction of independent schooling.

As the state increasingly took over, various politicians who took part in the process expressed what they expected from state education. Their intentions varied over time although the basic, common ambition was to provide a good education for all - whatever that meant during their lifetimes. State education, though, has failed to reach every single target they described.

The full details of the failure of state education is told in *The Welfare State We're In*. In summary, the standard has fallen. Illiteracy is now widespread. It must be considered astonishing that state education has proved so incompetent that, after eleven years of compulsory schooling, it still cannot teach a significant minority of adults - 20 per cent - even to read. Poor families have ended up with their children at the worst schools. Compulsory attendance at inferior schools has bred alienation and incivility to the point of encouraging crime. The ambition that state schools would create equality - or at least equality of opportunity - has failed too. It may even have had the reverse effect of reducing the chances of the children of poorer families of using education as a way up. No one has done worse out of state education than the poor.


State education has been a disaster. It has wasted what was developing so excitingly before. The assets of the independent schools - built up over centuries in some cases, like those of the hospitals - were taken over for free or at knock-down prices. Vast amounts of money have been wasted on layers of bureaucracy. The state has imposed what it considers the right methods of teaching - which have actually been poor methods - and has quashed innovation and competition between alternative methods. This is one of many failings which some people, such as Edward Baines, had the remarkable prescience to warn about in the 19th century.

It is a tragedy that the independent education was not allowed to continue to grow. It is a shame that the state take-over of education ever happened.

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xxiii Rev. Thomas Daniels letter written 24th April 1876, quoted in E.G.West *op cit*.

xxiv Inspector Fitch on the Lambeth district in 1878, quoted in E.G.West *Education and the State, op cit*.



James Bartholomew was trained as a banker in the City before moving into journalism with the Financial Times. He has been a leader writer for the Daily Telegraph and The Daily Mail. He is author of "The Welfare State We're In".