

‘A Most Peculiar Education’

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“Yn gyntaf rwyf am eich croesawu i Ogtedd Cymru, i Wrecsam ac yn arbennig i’r Athrofa, ac rwyf am ddyuno’n dda i chi yn eich trafodaethan.”¹

Had I been a schoolboy in an elementary school in Wales 150 years ago and had been heard speaking my own language the schoolmaster would have hung a board around my neck with the letters WN - Welsh Not - on it. If I were still wearing the board at the end of the week I would have been flogged.

The situation says much about the aims of education in Wales during the nineteenth century and about the teaching methodology.

My address will take you back 150 years, exactly to this month, and I am going to discuss some aspects of ‘A Most Peculiar Education’² which I believe shows similarities to some of the contemporary twentieth century issues.

In March of 1846 an educational inquiry was set up in Wales as a result of a motion in the House of Commons proposed by William Williams, MP for Coventry. He was a London Welshman who had made a fortune as a draper, a cloth and cotton dealer. His only formal education was at a Church School in Llanpumsaint in Carmarthenshire, but it had enabled him to ‘get on in the world’, and he realised the importance of education and especially an English language education. The Commission had a twofold aim. It was to inquire into

- i) the State of Education in the Principality of Wales
- ii) the means afforded the Labouring Classes of acquiring a Knowledge of the English Language.

William Williams was aware of the great civilizing influence of English and, as he stated in his speech to the Commons, ‘a band of efficient schoolmasters is kept at much less expense than a body of police or soldiery’. A very appealing argument to any government.

The Report of the Commission of Inquiry was presented in 1847, part of it in March, exactly 150 years ago, and it was a monumental piece of work both in the evidence gathered and in its conclusions.

Returning to the ‘Welsh Not’ or ‘Welsh Stick’. The commissioners came across the custom when visiting a school at Llandyrnog, a small rural school in Denbighshire.

‘My attention was drawn to a piece of wood suspended by a string around a boy’s neck, and on the wood the words, ‘Welsh Stick’. This, I was told, was a stigma for speaking Welsh. But, in fact, his only alternative was to speak Welsh or to say nothing. He did not understand English, and there is no systematic exercise in interpretation’³

This comment reaches the very heart of the problem of education in Wales in the mid nineteenth century, the problem of communication, and yet the Report states,

‘With one exception, all the schools in North Wales have been established for the purpose of teaching English among Welsh masters’.

When the Commission of inquiry was set up, James Kay-Shuttleworth, Secretary to the Privy Council Committee on Education, sent out instructions to the Commissioners, one of which referred specifically to teachers,

'Whenever you have means to form a just estimate of the qualifications and attainments of the master, it should be stated as not to operate as a discouragement to humble but deserving men, who have few opportunities of education.'

It would appear that Kay-Shuttleworth was aware of another fundamental problem, the quality of the teaching profession.

In 1847 there were 625 teachers in North Wales of whom 601 received, 'an income less than the wages of the lowest class of skilled mechanics'. 401 teachers received, 'an income lower than the wages of common agricultural labourers'. The conclusion reached by the Commission was that,

'The teachers in North Wales are, in fact, drawn from the lowest class in society which contains individuals competent to read, write and cipher.'

It was further seen that often even these qualifications were dispensed with and, 'any person who is supposed to understand the English language better than his neighbors is encouraged to undertake the office of schoolmaster'.

The wages of schoolmasters were so low that, 'few persons are induced to undertake the employment who are not incapacitated by age or infirmity for manual labour'.

A school near Wrexham, at Pontblythin, provides the perfect example of all the problems and weaknesses of the system,

'The master has received slender education, and no training. His knowledge of the English language does not exceed that of a labouring man in England. He adopts no system of interpretation, although many of his scholars understand English imperfectly. His total income does not amount to £19 and he has no house. The loss of one eye appears to have induced him to become a schoolmaster upon these terms.'

The problems of teachers' remuneration and professional motivation are by no means new. Although English was the medium of communication in Welsh schools and the major aim was the teaching of English, the linguistic standard of the teachers was very low. At Llanbryn-mair school in Mid Wales,

'The master is a village shopkeeper. He has never trained to teach. He appeared unable to maintain discipline as the children laughed at everything he said to them. He was unable to speak English correctly, but asked the following questions, "Did God heard their groanings" "What did Moses said" "To where he led his flocks?" "What did John worn?"'

To be fair English men were no better. At Holt, a village five miles from Wrexham and right on the border with England,

'The master is an Englishman, 39 years of age. He speaks English incorrectly and his pronunciation is very bad.'

The medium of communication was fundamental to the success of any education and was recognised as such in the Report,

'When examined in Welsh some of the children could read the New Testament pretty well, and were able to answer some questions respecting content. In English they could neither read nor understand; ... The consequent hindrance to mental development in every branch of knowledge is inevitable.'

The commissioners examined 19,521 children but only 149 were able to read well and with understanding, 'with propriety and expression', and the Report commented,

'Teachers who are unable to pronounce English cannot be expected to give instructions in the art of reading.'

But competence in English was not the only problem. In arithmetic a similar problem arose,
‘Many teachers have a practical skill in working sums in the first four rules of arithmetic, but very few an intelligent knowledge ... of the reasons upon which simple arithmetical operations are based.’

Grammar was ‘an exercise in memory only’, while geography, ‘like grammar is taught as an effort of memory’, and ‘there is nothing to indicate that teachers are aware that such a science exists’. However, there was one good point. ‘The art of writing is the forte of Welsh masters’, - they produced beautiful copperplate full of grammatical errors!

It was manifestly clear that teaching through the medium of English was a failure,
‘Their extremely limited knowledge of English combined with the fact that all books at present employed for teaching grammar, geography and history are written in English only prove that such instruction is impossible’.

Nevertheless parents still expected their children to be taught through the medium of English,
“In the day school” they say, “we wish our children to be taught in English only: what good can be gained by teaching Welsh? We know Welsh already.”

They wanted their children, like William Williams, to get on in the world.

It did not help matters that corporal punishment was extensively used in every school and the cane and birch rod were the only pieces of equipment that were available in plentiful supply. The result being that, ‘the general appearance of pupils indicated that they were habitually governed by fear’.

This most peculiar education is well illustrated by the report on Gresford school, about three miles from Wrexham,

‘The master and mistress are husband and wife; neither of them ever trained to conduct a school. We found the master in a public-house; the hour was 10 a.m. The boys were in the school meanwhile, playing with all their might. In the afternoon, when I had occasion to revisit the school, I found the master again absent, and the boys making all manner of noises, playing horses, etc. The master had no control over the school, and does not appear to think noise and confusion at all incompatible with education, neither has he much management of any kind. ... When he had occasion to leave the room for a short time, he took no measures to secure order in his absence, and instantly he was gone the school was a complete fair.’

The two major weaknesses would seem to be the low ability level of the teachers, whether in English or not, and a lack of training. A fortnight at a national school was considered to be sufficient preparation for the profession and that fortnight would be with an untrained teacher. Only 65 teachers in North Wales had been trained with an average length of 6 months and in the model or normal schools, that were beginning to be established, the difficulty for teachers was, ‘that they were made to do the work of teaching as well as training to teach’ - another contemporary twentieth century problem. But as one commissioner put it, ‘I observed a more incurable defect - they appeared to have no natural disposition for teaching’; a defect, whether in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, which cannot be rectified by any amount or form of training.

When Lingen, one of the commissioners, undertook his inquiry in 1846-47 he wrote about South Wales,

‘My district exhibits the phenomenon of a peculiar language isolating the mass from the upper portion of society ... the Welsh element is never found at the top of the social scale ... his language keeps him under the hatches, being one in which he can neither acquire nor communicate necessary information. It is a language of old fashioned agriculture, of theology and simple rustic life, while all the world about him is English’.

The Report of the Commission of inquiry became known in Wales as ‘Brad y Llyfrau Gleision’, - ‘The Treachery of the Blue Books’. It showed all too clearly that the children of Wales were receiving a ‘most peculiar education’. There was a tremendous outcry in Wales at the conclusions of the Commission which seemed to cast aspersions upon the Welsh people. Yet it provided the necessary spur to a movement for securing a better system of education. Now there had to be ‘a most peculiar education’, using the word

‘peculiar’ in the sense of ‘special’, for ‘a most peculiar people’. It was realised that teachers had to be educated and that they needed training.

Teacher training institutions began to be established in Wales. In 1848 the Carmarthen Training College was opened and the normal department of the National School at Caernarfon became a separate training institution in 1849, with its own principal, to become the Normal Teacher Training College in 1859. In 1872 a University College was opened at Aberystwyth, to be followed by Cardiff in 1883 and Bangor in 1884. The University of Wales was formed in 1893. The Welsh Intermediate and Technical Education Act was passed in 1889, giving rise to Intermediate or County Schools, and in 1896 the Central Welsh Board was set up to oversee standards through examinations and inspection. It could be said that in the second half of the nineteenth century Wales achieved an education system of elementary schools, secondary schools, training colleges, an education board and a university. By today Wales has a system of bi-lingual education ensuring that one of the miracles of the history of Wales, the survival of the language, continues. No longer is there a ‘Welsh Not’.

The 1847 Report identified tremendous weaknesses within the education system. It showed that the whole emphasis was placed upon an utilitarian education rather than a ‘rounded, balanced culture conveyed to a child in its mother tongue’;⁴ a language a child could understand. These mid nineteenth-century tensions regarding the aims of education can be identified within educational provision today, as can many of the weaknesses, but the main aim of teacher education must surely remain the same; it must be one of enabling teachers, everywhere, to provide ‘very special people’, our children, with ‘a very special education’, rather than with a ‘most peculiar education’.

NOTES

1. Translation – ‘First of all allow me to welcome you to North Wales, to Wrexham and especially to NEWI and let me wish you every success in your deliberations.’

2. This address was delivered in March, 1997, exactly 150 years after the Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into Elementary Education in Wales. The title was inspired by a book compiled and edited by Meic Stevens, ‘A Most Peculiar People - Quotations about Wales and the Welsh’.

3. Quotations are taken from the the Reports of the Commissioners of inquiry into the State of Education in Wales, 1847.

4. Prys Morgan, ‘Welsh Education from Circulating Schools to Blue Books.’ *Journal of the Faculty of Education*, University College, Cardiff, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1985.

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