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The Blue Books and Education  
1816-1896

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## WORKING PAPERS



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# **Stencilled Occasional Papers**

Centre For Contemporary Cultural Studies Occasional Paper

THE BLUE BOOKS AND EDUCATION, 1816-1896:

The Critical Reading of Official Sources

Joh  
Richard Johnson

This is a Critical Commentary on the Education (Poorer Classes) volumes and those volumes dealing with Elementary Education in the Education (General) set of the British Parliamentary Papers Series published by the Irish University Press

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## Introduction

But they are facts attested by Her Majesty's Government in the Blue Book presented to Parliament, and they cannot be disputed by anyone, I suppose?  
John G. Talbot (Cross Commissioner) to Thomas Smyth (witness)<sup>1</sup>

The rhetorical question of a royal commissioner prompts a return to first principles in search of a critical commentary.

What happened in history reaches the researcher through an intermediary. Sources that are called 'primary' derive directly from the activities of historical actors. The locations of these historical actor-mediators in their own society have shaped the versions of reality which they present. This has happened through the biographical clusters of experience which they as individuals have acquired and through their group and class identities and more or less institutionalized roles. These have carried some typical assumptions, interests and limitations of vision. No source is exempt from these tendencies since all have a human, therefore a societal and, commonly, an institutional derivation. In addition the form, medium intention, exact personal circumstance of communication have affected what it is possible to record. Genres of sources - statistical series, private letter, autobiography, novel and, not least, official document - each pose intrinsic difficulties of use. Testimony before a select committee of the House of Commons, for example, is a public, self-conscious and political event unyielding of nuances of motive compared with a private letter.

The concept of 'primary mediation' is less misleading than that of 'primary source'. Add the secondary mediation of researcher (another actor-mediator in a different society) and we have a measure of historiographical distance. The history of the books is twice-removed at least from past event or situation. And that itself was problematic enough.

Some of the distortions which will inevitably arise may be lessened by critical technique, care, honesty and explicitness in handling materials. There is, no doubt, a realm of fact that can be re-assembled by these means. Concern with meaning and explanation, however, forces historians to see that historical actors (like themselves) differ in their perceptions of reality, often irreconcilably. Each version may be situationally valid, impregnable to positive tests of 'accuracy' or 'authenticity'. If so, a better kind of history accepts and tries to explain differences of perception and attempts to reconstitute a whole, incorporating diversity, fixing on relationships. Completeness becomes a major test of objectivity.

An analysis like this needs testing against a particular source. It may certainly be applied to Blue Books; more fruitfully still to Blue Books dealing with education. It directs attention to situational and formal biases and to the whole question of the representation of relevant view-points. It poses the questions: whose Blue Books and for what? Whose versions of educational problems do they portray? At what points are they misleading because incomplete? Perhaps they reveal only one side of a set of educational and social relations. If so, uncritical use may father really gross historical bias, grosser perhaps, than that which technical inaccuracy fosters.

The Reports - An Outline

The documents with which this essay deals form, in some ways, a heterogeneous collection. They span a whole era of educational, social and political change. The Brougham Select Committee of 1816-18, the first of the series, predated the philanthropic discovery of the Northern, industrial city, the coming of parliamentary reform and the innovations in government of the 1830s. It worked against the backwash (not quite so turbulent since about 1803) of a counter-revolutionary disinclination to educate the poor at all. It was the first concentrated attempt, by parliamentary inquiry, to raise issues which were to vex the country for fifty years or more. The Cross Commission, by contrast, reported in the political context of adult male suffrage (very imperfectly realised) and of the growth of mass party, and to a society three-quarters of whose population lived in areas designated urban and whose children were required by law to attend state or state-approved schools. Similarly, if the post-Napoleonic-war years were the seed-bed of early and mid-Victorian attitudes to the poor, the Departmental Committee on London's pauper children of 1896 was part of the re-evaluation of these orthodoxies which marked the turn of the century.

The documents also take different forms: four select committees, three royal commissions and a series of inquiries within executive departments of government which did not necessarily, however, employ a departmental personnel. The 'Commission' into education in Wales belongs really to this latter category. It was carried out under the auspices of the Education Department, not under a crown or parliamentary commission.<sup>2</sup> There was, in fact, no royal commission on education until 1858.

Different types of inquiry tended to use different methods. Usually, the sole device of the select committee was the interrogation of witnesses before a committee composed of members of Parliament. Three committees in the collection conform entirely to this model: Roebuck's of 1834-35, Slaney's of 1838 and the Select Committee on the Education of Destitute Children of 1861.<sup>3</sup> The Committee of 1816-18 was a uniquely expansive affair, commission-like in scope, summoning witnesses but collecting massive returns from the parish clergy too. The three great commissions in the series - Newcastle (1858-62); Cross (1886-88); the Argyll Commission on Scottish Education (1865-68) - all secured returns from localities, voluntary organizations and individuals, Newcastle and Argyll also using on-the-spot<sup>4</sup> investigation by assistant-commissioners, even sending them abroad. The Welsh 'Commission' used local inquiry alone. Cross preferred its witnesses to do the travelling and called on over one hundred and fifty of them.<sup>5</sup> Membership of commissions was not restricted, of course, to members of Parliament.

The inquiries were also very diverse in their terms of reference and scope. It is useful here to distinguish three periods. The early inquiries, up to and including the Welsh Commission, tackled huge provinces limited mainly by geography and by some omnibus social definition which embraced all sections of the working-class, from artisan to 'casual poor'. The original brief of Brougham's polymathic enterprise was narrow enough: 'the education of the lower orders in the metropolis' with special reference<sup>6</sup> to 'children of paupers who shall be found begging in the streets'. To begin with the committee conformed to a pattern of post-war inquiry - focussing on London, covering<sup>7</sup> the linked issues of crime, 'mendicity', pauperism, prisons and police. But by 1819, impelled by the chairman's ambitions, the committee had counted schools of all kinds in England, Wales and Scotland. It had even penetrated to Eton and Winchester linking them to the original<sup>8</sup> brief as appropriators of endowments originally intended for the poor. The select committees of the

1830's were a little less ambitious: that of 1834-35 examined 'the present state of the education of the people in England and Wales'; that of 1838, reflecting the industrial and provincial emphasis of the decade, looked at the education of children 'of the poorer classes in large towns'.<sup>9</sup> The Welsh Commission defined its clientele as 'the labouring classes' (and also in terms of their ignorance of English).<sup>11</sup>

The early inquiries had the defects of pioneers. Resources were stretched by ambitions; findings, in terms of detail and coverage, were sometimes superficial, though no-one could make this charge against the Welsh Commission.<sup>12</sup> The reports anticipated or accompanied tentative first steps in state action - the beginnings of concern with pauper education within the framework of the new Poor Law Commission, the work of the first factory inspectors, the slow growth of the Education Department's grant system up to 1846. They owed relatively little to definitions of educational problems which law and administrative practice were to make more precise. They owed much more to the complicated politics of education and to anxiety born of social conflict. Together with the educational investigations of urban statistical societies, Lord Kerry's educational returns of 1835, the early commissioner-like reports of inspectors of schools, factories and prisons, they form part of a swelling interest in popular education which was so marked a feature of the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>13</sup>

The second group of reports, those of the 1850s and 1860s, appear more professional and more thorough and certainly focussed more closely on administrative and legislative issues. The Newcastle Commission's terms of reference were wide enough: 'to inquire into the present state of popular education in England and Wales'. In practice, as the commissioners acknowledged, they concentrated their attention upon a pre-existing apparatus, especially the grant system, now greatly grown in scope and expense, upon legislation dealing with attendance and upon the work of the Charity Commission.<sup>14</sup> They were more careful too, aided by innovations in law, to distinguish categories of working-class children. Children were parcelled into bundles for appropriately assorted treatment: children of the 'independent' or 'self-supporting' working class for ordinary elementary schooling, pauper children for 'separate' or 'district' schools, vagrant or destitute children for industrial or ragged schools, children who had fallen foul of the law for reformatories. After Newcastle, the collection of documents splits, one series dealing with 'ordinary' children, the other with 'exceptions'. The concern with classifying exceptions can be seen still more obsessively in the 1861 Select Committee.<sup>15</sup>

The last group of reports, occupying the period after Forster's Education Act of 1870, were essentially concerned with the operation and revision of existing law and departmental practice. Cross was charged 'to inquire into the working of the elementary education acts'; the 1896 Departmental Committee dealt with the whole poor law inheritance as it had affected pauper children in London.<sup>16</sup>

#### The Reports and the Working Class

The most obvious fact about the volumes is that they are full of middle-class people and the gentry puzzling about the schooling of children of the working class. The children were defined with varying degrees of imprecision and there were also changes in the kinds of people who did the talking, notably the growing contingents of civil servants and the emphatic arrival of the elementary school-teachers before Cross in 1886. The objects of inquiry, however, were rarely agents of it. A careful combing reveals only a scattering of examples of working-class witness. The education series is less revealing in this respect than

contemporary inquiries into conditions of work or trade unionism. These often found room for working-class testimony, even for the testimony of children.

It is true that Francis Place contributed to the Brougham and Roebuck Select Committees. He was a major witness before the latter. An ex-Jacobin, journeyman-tailor and secretary of several trade clubs, he was in his own words 'an observer of the habits, manners and intelligence of the working people'.<sup>17</sup> His evidence was certainly distinctive both for his educational secularism and for his championing of working-class respectability and 'improvement'. But he was detached from the radical culture of the artisans by his Benthamism and by his association with middle-class politics and educational schemes. His view of the working class was that of a man who had risen out of it.<sup>18</sup>

Even so, there was a dearth of similarly-derived evidence until 1887 when three 'representatives of the working classes' appeared before Cross. They are listed rather incongruously among the more normal run of witnesses - civil servants, HMIs, clerics, members of school boards, voluntary school managers and teachers. The label is of doubtful accuracy for two out of the three. Thomas Ekford Powell, once apprentice bookbinder, was union secretary of this decidedly aristocratic trade and also a minor salaried official of the London School Board.<sup>19</sup> Henry Williams was a small jobbing printer working at home and employing youthful labour on his own account. Only Thomas Smyth, a plasterer and, with Powell, a delegate of the London trades council, was an unambiguously working-class witness.<sup>20</sup> All three distinguished themselves from the very poor, Williams with a snobbish pride, Smyth with a radically egalitarian emphasis, wanting to erode the differences. Smyth also advocated unpalatable policies: more democratic control of board schools, finance through progressive taxation, the abolition of fees and an end to class privileges in education. Like his Chartist predecessors thirty or forty years earlier he saw 'this question of educating the people, as a lever by which I hope they will raise themselves from their present degraded position'. The commissioners were not a uniformly conservative group but some received these opinions with evident hostility. They bullied him with official statistics, equated his views with 'communism' and attempted to convert him. He was pointedly asked by one commissioner 'whether you have any special advantages with regard to the mastery of this subject of the education as given in schools'.<sup>21</sup> Readers of the Cross Commission may judge the force of his reply and the general value of his testimony. But certainly all three token working-men spoke as parents with children at elementary schools - a unique perspective before educational inquiries. That they differed a great deal only adds to the value of their evidence; parenthood in elementary education was by no means a monolithic interest.

The reports are nearly barren, then, of testimony directly out of working-class circumstance. But wholesale omission is not the end of possible distortions. After all, if something important is obviously missing from a source there is every incentive to look for it elsewhere. This is not quite the case: the users of the schools are encountered in the reports observed through the eyes of the providers. The danger lies in uncritically accepting externally-derived images.

Parents and children figure in the reports mainly in the context of three kinds of argument. They appear as objects of educational 'need', as sufferers from various species of 'ignorance'. They are seen as recipients of a service in arguments about the effects of education. Finally they are examined as more or less haphazard users of the schools in the context of the problem of attendance.

Questions about educational 'needs' and effects were most prominent in the early reports. There were two main reasons for this. It had to do with the general chronology of the educational movement or, more correctly, the drive for schooling. The statistical series compiled at the time and recent local studies strongly suggest that the really sustained boom in public elementary schooling (that is of schools provided by philanthropy) was delayed until the 1830s, possibly until the 1840s.<sup>23</sup> Earlier growth was fluctuating and uncertain, probably with a marked plateau in the early 1820s. Until the mid-century the main pre-occupations of educational enthusiasts were how to accelerate and sustain philanthropic energies (with or without state interference), how to multiply schools and, as important, how to enhance their quality. Of course, there is some discussion of attendance in the early reports<sup>24</sup> but the problem of how to get the children to the schools, once provided and approaching efficiency, was a more central concern of the 1850s and early 1860s. Hence the emphasis in the early reports on both coverage and educational method and the need to establish a case for extension and sophistication through exposing the extent of 'ignorance' and the power of better kinds of teachers and schools to remove it.<sup>25</sup> Disclosures about the deplorable behaviour of working-class adults and adolescents, about children running wild in the streets and about their petty stocks of knowledge provided the ammunition of educational activism.

Allied to this was anxiety about a range of social problems. Education was linked with pauperism, crime, public order and economic and social discipline in general. These were all issues which orthodox opinion designated 'moral' and with which, therefore, education could deal.<sup>26</sup> So attention was directed to popular culture and behaviour especially at times and in places of crisis. The chronology of report illustrates the connection. A bunch of early inquiries to which Brougham's committee belonged occupied the post-war years of distress and turbulence. A further bigger cluster marked the decade of Reform Bill crisis, new Poor Law, the mushrooming of the unstamped from 1830 to 1836 and the first Chartist upsurge. By contrast, the 1820s, relatively a peaceful and prosperous decade, produced no major educational inquiry. As significant were the places chosen for study: the Brougham Select Committee paid particular attention to the poorest, most riotous parts of London including Spitalfields, Bethnal Green and St. Giles; the 1838 Committee concentrated on raw and radical cities of the North; Wales was the home of Rebecca and of Chartist insurrection.

In the quieter mid-century years the problem of attendance was the Achilles heel of provided schooling. It undercut the commitment of the 1830s - to remoralize a whole class. Financially, because of dependence upon fees, it was disastrous. Children, it was found on recurrent investigation, attended very irregularly, changed school often, were withdrawn from schooling early (commonly at the ages of ten or eleven) while a substantial minority escaped school entirely.<sup>26</sup> One inspector of schools called this 'the mockery of education'; it seemed to undermine the whole massive growth of voluntary schools, state aid and teacher training.<sup>29</sup> To explain this aberration people began to look more closely than before at the attitudes of parents and children. For this reason the period from 1850 to the gradual introduction of general compulsion between 1870 and 1880 is particularly rich in observation. By the time Cross reported, the problem had changed; effective enforcement replaced concern with parental motivation, except perhaps in the matter of fees.<sup>30</sup> It is the Newcastle Commission with its distinctive attitude to parental aspiration that is potentially the most useful source.

The volume of evidence produced by these concerns is so large it is hard to summarize even typical deficiencies. Not all biases of perception were systematic, class-related. Individuals varied in their sympathy or perspecuity and, ideally, individual witness should be related to individual biography. But some points may be made about uniformities leaving reservations till later.

Readers of the reports should first try to gauge the gulf between observer and observed in nineteenth-century conditions. There is a glimpse of this in exchanges between Smyth and the Cross Commissioners but essential nuances of speech and tone elude the printed word. Most witnesses, school-teachers, apart perhaps, were removed from the working class in almost every conceivable aspect of life and culture - income, education, habitation, dress, language and, not least, family circumstance. Understanding required rare gifts of mental translation. They encountered working people as their social inferiors, as masters to men, as broadcloth to fustian, often literally as riches to rags. If encounter was more than casual - and often a whole view of the working-class child was shaped on the streets - it occurred through a business or professional or philanthropic capacity. This may, in one respect alone, have allowed an observer to pierce the opacity of another culture. Few of the people who reported were 'professional' investigators of the poor. The nearest contemporary equivalent to the ubiquitous social scientist were statistical society experts and the assistant commissioners. These men were also commonly members of professions, very commonly clerics.<sup>32</sup> More usually knowledge of the poor was built up from some kind of work among them. Role was superimposed on class: clergyman to 'flock', manufacturer to 'hand', giver to recipient (the philanthropic nexus), master or mistress to servant, magistrate to criminal, teacher and school manager to child and parent. Role and class shaped perception but also the information the observed might yield. In all these relationships, moreover, the stronger party took the active part. It was teachers, clergymen and magistrates that did all the talking. A Mayhew-like ability to listen was rare.<sup>33</sup> A sense of the normality of one-way communication is caught in one exchange before the 1834 Committee. Henry Althans, inspector of British and Foreign schools, was asked, 'Are you consulted by the parents of the children?' He answered, 'I very frequently call the parents together and examine the children in their presence, and address the parents on the advantages of education.'<sup>34</sup> In the complicated sociology of school, teachers, managers, parents and children might each have had their definitions of what school was for but parents and children may well have known more of the dominant definitions than teachers and managers knew of theirs. Very authoritarian teaching regimes must have strengthened a tendency still observable in the modern school.<sup>35</sup>

The reports provide many examples of such obscurity. In extreme instances whole areas of existence, physical or cultural, were simply shut out from view. Witnesses to Brougham's Select Committee noted the unwillingness of businessmen-philanthropists and even doctors to penetrate the inner regions of areas like St. Giles because of disease or fear of 'annoyance'<sup>36</sup> - 'those who undertook to visit that district got cool upon it.'<sup>36</sup> The reports of the commissioners of 1847 resemble traveller's tales from darkest Wales. The language, object of official attack, also obscured an underlying culture despite the aid of bilingual school-teacher assistants. Commissioner Lingen, later secretary of the Education Department (and of whom much more later), made strenuous attempts to comprehend 'the phenomenon of the peculiar language isolating the mass from the upper portion of society' though he was inclined to see the loss as all Welsh.<sup>37</sup> Symons, his colleague and a moralistic anti-Radical, made a virtue of his incomprehension.<sup>38</sup> His sneers at 'Welsh screech', Welsh immorality and Welsh sedition

rebounded forcefully on the whole Commission, stigmatised by the Welsh popular media as 'the treason of the Blue Books'.<sup>39</sup> A study of Symons' method, on which at least he was especially explicit, shows some of the sources of his bias. Welsh parents at Sunday schools were suspicious of his note-book; Welsh children in day schools had to be bribed out of silence. He relied<sup>40</sup> heavily on the evidence of Anglican clergymen and of an Anglicised elite. Here a class barrier was heightened by linguistic difference and something akin to racial arrogance.

More commonly, superficial observation produced stereotypes. The problem of attendance evoked two such - the poverty and the apathy arguments. Rarely found apart, they were often employed in broken-backed combination. But the poverty argument was the dominant explanation before Brougham's Select Committee declining in force thereafter. The commonest explanation overall was the weakness of will to benefit from schooling.

The Brougham findings are early, interesting and untypical. The Committee's third report declared, 'there is most unquestionable evidence that the anxiety of the<sup>41</sup> poor for education continues not only unabated, but daily increasing'. This should be read in the light of the educational politics of the post-war period. A part of Brougham's own strategy was to use popular demand to break down the opposition of the 1790s to education of all kinds. It can be seen best in his role within the<sup>42</sup> 'mechanics' institute movement as rhetorician of educational progress. But the evidence of his report tended to support his conclusion. Most witnesses found that parents wanted schooling for their children and were prevented from acquiring it by lack of resources - lack of schools or commonly lack of clothes or shoes. The parochial returns tell a similar story though sometimes in suspiciously stereotyped language. Of the various formulæ adopted, the optimistic ones - 'the poor are without sufficient means of education, but are desirous of possessing them' - greatly outweigh the more jaundiced and sometimes more revealing versions - 'At present, in many cases, it appears as if the poor thought they were laying the subscribers under an obligation, by permitting<sup>43</sup> their children to attend the charity school.' (Egremont, Cumberland). Evidence given in person by London philanthropists was all the more telling since the parents<sup>44</sup> in question were usually labourers, 'casual poor' and frequently Irish.

Brougham revealed a large unsatisfied demand, but does not show why so many parents were 'desirous', nor, in depth, how poverty limited the use of existing facilities. The 'poor' emerge as one would expect from the philanthropic vision: dreadfully dirty and dissolute, easily tempted by drink, crime and fornication, but malleable under superior influence, 'grateful' and even 'civil'. Gratefulness was often illustrated by anecdote:

Is there any indisposition on the part of parents to send their children? - I believe not: as far as my experience goes, there is a great desire to send them, even among the lower orders. With the permission of the Committee, I would mention an anecdote: an old Irish barrow-woman, with a pipe in her mouth, came into the girls school one day, and said to the mistress, 'good madam, God Almighty<sup>45</sup> has got a place for you in Heaven, for your kindness to my child.'

In the same anecdotal way poverty or 'distress' were reduced to discrete phenomena that happened to come to attention - typically to 'the pardonable pride' of parents about sending children to school in rags.<sup>46</sup> The portrayal of poverty as a crushing, permanent and total way of life was rarer, though Edward Wakefield and his allies on the progressive wing of the British and Foreign School Society got nearest to it, their house-by-house inquiries anticipating the thoroughness of the statistical societies:

In the course of my visits, I witnessed great misery; wretchedness which appeared to me very permanent... the unhealthy appearance of the majority of the children was too apparent. It would seem that they came into the world to exist during a few years in a state of torture, since by no other name can I call sickness, and dirt and ignorance.

The dominant stereotype emerged in the reports of the 1830s, carrying over into the average run of assistant commissioners' reports for Newcastle, especially those of Hedley, Hare, Wilkinson and Hodgson. Attitudes hardened. Doubts expressed by early witnesses about the genuineness of parental interest - 'they profess' - crystallized into dogma. Parental reasons became 'excuses'. The force of poverty was minimised, or seen to affect only a separate working-class stratum. Sometimes it was argued that high wages or booms of economic activity increased indifference. Witnesses stressed 'apathy', 'carelessness', 'refractoriness' and an ignorance of the benefits of what was on offer. 'Want of will' as one assistance commissioner put it, 'much exceeds the want of power.' The opinion of Dr Kay, soon to move from Poor Law to Education Department, and star witness in 1838, was typical:

As far as the pecuniary resources of the population are concerned, with the exception of hand-loom weavers, and some of the inferior paid operatives... I do not think there is any deficiency of funds, if they are properly applied to the education of the poor in Manchester.

Most witnesses in the 1830s favoured the charging of a realistic fee for schooling, for if poverty was not a cause of non-attendance parents might value what they paid for. A number favoured compulsion, usually an 'educational test' legally prohibiting employment of the illiterate and thereby placing the onus on the parent. A pervasive anti-Radicalism caused observers to dismiss as 'seditious' forms of popular self-activity whose indigenous self-image was educational. The wide circulation of the Poor Man's Guardian was deplored for example, despite the markedly educational stance of this, the most intellectually impressive of the unstamped journals. More often, popular opinion was seen as inert, needing stimulus from without. As Professor West has suggested, educators denied the existence of a legitimate and indigenous educational demand and looked to 'temporary imposed choice' as a solution of parental perversions. The problem of perception, the moralism of conclusions (and the eccentricity of the man they called 'the Baby Professor') are caught in a statement of Samuel Wilderspin, leading proponent of infant schools in the 1830s:

To the state of morals generally I have paid some attention. I have put on various disguises and gone in among them, and I have seen them as they are and not as they appear to be. If you go in dressed respectably they put on a reserve, and you do not see them as they are, but if you go in with a dirty face and with a long beard and a jacket on, you see them as they are, and you find their conversation generally consists in immoral language, and language of an obscene nature... They may dabble a little in politics, but generally there is a lamentable want of general information; and young creatures of both sexes may be seen in the public-houses hearing all this, pledging each other in their glasses, and the boys with a pipe stuck in their mouths smoking.

### Correcting the Bias of the Reports

It is not intended to examine in detail how school appeared to parents and children or to replace stereotypes with more complete versions. But a closer approximation to completeness is possible and it is worth discussing how it might be achieved.

The most important need is for sources that express a more indigenous view of educational process. Searching for these involves questioning common assumptions of educational history which the official sources encourage: notably, a belief in working-class passivity and the assumption that only managed and sponsored forms of education were (are) worth the name. The notion that learning occurs mainly in school or college is, after all, a very modern one. In England (though not in Scotland) the ambition of mass schooling - of getting all the children into schools - was a nineteenth-century innovation. To equate school and education is to disguise the most significant historical development of all: the drive to supplant spontaneous, indigenous and haphazard forms of learning by supervised, controlled and routinized ones. It is also necessarily to represent hostility or apathy to schooling as opposition to education or learning itself.

The schools need placing in a wider educational context. The types with which the reports mainly deal - Sunday and monitorial schools, the infant schools of the 1820s and 1830s, the state-aided voluntary schools of the mid-century and their board school successors - formed part of the total resources for learning available to children. They certainly encountered many rivals. Some of these, like private schooling, education in family or at work or some forms of apprenticeship, were customary, though sometimes persisting with surprising vitality. Others, like the educational improvisations of Jacobins, Radicals, Owenites and Chartists, were deliberate attempts at substitution. Achieving hegemony of school and college was a long process. And this history of educational 'advance' is as much to do with monopoly, engrossment and even the destruction of alternatives as with filling gaps.

Recreating indigenous networks of learning poses great difficulties. It is akin to (or a part of) the retrieval of the popular cultural forms of the past. It is easier to study the cultural aggressions of nineteenth-century authority (including aggression directed towards children in schools) than to discover the more normal patterns by which children acquired skills and a view of their social world. Two kinds of source, however, are especially valuable. The networks used by individuals can be studied from working-class autobiography, a genre obsessed with the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>58</sup> It is possible to examine the (often peripheral) place of schooling, alongside family, neighbourhood, friends and forms of companionship in learning. Secondly, the popular radical press shows how the most politically-committed section of the working class viewed provided schooling, how its educational goals differed from those of philanthropy and how education was sought independently. These sources are especially rich between the 1790s and the 1850s because of the vitality of counter-culture.<sup>59</sup> Both pose problems of use and representativeness - but that is a different story. Certainly they supply a startlingly different picture from that of the reports.

A second resource is to read the reports in a certain way, using the information which they sometimes provide but not succumbing to the implied definitions of its significance. The reader can often translate observation into a working class milieu for himself, drawing on knowledge derived from other sources. He is helped in this by the fact that not all observations fit the favoured meanings. It was

often observed, for instance, that parental attitudes to schooling were utilitarian. Progress in reading, writing and arithmetic were the main tests of the efficiency of a school. These skills once acquired, children were withdrawn.<sup>60</sup> To providers this indicated an unwillingness to make further sacrifices. But perhaps this instrumental attitude to schooling was a rational adjustment to circumstance. Perhaps parents took from school what they valued, rejecting as soon as possible the petty regulation and the large measure of indoctrination which schooling always entailed. This matches much observed behaviour and also the very explicit recognition of the ideological content of schooling informing the whole radical tradition.<sup>61</sup> The 'moral' training of school, central for educator, was detested by the radicals, and perhaps regarded as dispensable by many more in the struggle for economic security. A somewhat similar explanation may account for the surprising persistence of private schooling despite its expense and the drive to replace it. Schools wholly financed from fees were at least subject to parental control. As one assistant commissioner<sup>62</sup> put it, disapprovingly, 'Parents may dictate their own programme.'

Again, not all witnesses in the reports showed the same or the same degree of bias. Where special thoroughness or perspicuity is plain, evidence should be given a disproportionate weight. The evidence of James Ridall Wood in 1838 is a case in point. Wood was personally responsible for a set of reports on urban school provision published in the 1830s mainly under the auspices of the Manchester Statistical Society. His precise and accurate work produced more reliable counts of different kinds of schools than the governmental series, especially of the ephemeral private sector.<sup>63</sup> His data was collected on the ground by tramping round the streets of cities like Birmingham, 'leaving not even a court that was inhabited, to the best of my belief, unexplored.'<sup>64</sup> He was also a man of independent judgement though not exempt from every philanthropic bias. He was one of the few witnesses of the 1830s to stress the force of poverty in unambiguous language - 'It appears to me, in fact, that the only way in which general education can obtain must be by an advance in the wages of the adult population.'<sup>65</sup> Compared with all the circumlocution on this absolutely central issue and all the piecemeal and peripheral schemes to encourage attendance, this was exceptionally honest and clear-headed.

Some of the Newcastle assistant commissioners' reports are also especially valuable. The commissioners themselves, in their instructions, showed a novel interest in popular opinion. The heading 'the supply and demand of education' introduced a comprehensive set of questions about non-attendance and irregular attendance, many phrased to encourage curiosity about parental choice.<sup>66</sup> Assistant commissioners were told 'you should attempt to collect trustworthy evidence as to the general level of intellectual power amongst the class in question.'<sup>67</sup> They were to 'remember the importance of taking the evidence of the parents of the school children, as well as that of the patrons and managers of schools'<sup>68</sup>. The advantage (but also the difficulty) of 'personal acquaintance with persons of the labouring classes' was stressed.<sup>69</sup>

This prospectus was not uniformly followed, even in spirit. Dr. Hodgson's report on London was full of familiar prejudice - parental 'excuses', 'self-caused' poverty and denunciation of 'claptrap about the oppression of the workmen'.<sup>70</sup> But a few assistant commissioners took this part of their brief very seriously. Here, for example, is Patrick Cumin (another future secretary of the Education Department) describing his procedure at Bristol:

I thought it expedient to examine some of the working classes themselves - the fathers and the mothers of the children who attend the National and the British schools. For this purpose I got the schoolmasters to invite a certain number of the parents to meet me. I visited others at their houses; I walked through the most degraded part of Bristol under the guidance of a police superintendent. By the kind permission of merchants and manufacturers, I went into the great works, and saw the men, women, and boys at work, and I put to them... questions... Moreover, I visited public libraries and places of popular resort at all times of the day... The opinions and feelings of the working men... are important matters in this inquiry, and... the only satisfactory method of ascertaining their opinions and their feelings, is to come directly in contact with the labouring man at his work, or after he has finished his daily task... I confess that I attach more weight to the evidence derived from the work-people themselves than from any other source.

This was hardly random sampling, nor talking in conditions of equality, but at least Cumin allowed working people to speak for themselves. He collected pithy comments from colliers and carpenters, labourers and errand boys, often reporting them with a mild surprise. Other reports in the series have, in whole or in part, similar virtues: Fraser's report on the South Western agricultural counties, Forster's section on Pennine leadminers, some of Winder's material on Lancashire and Yorkshire. It is as though they were discovering for the first time what Jenkins found in Wales: 'It is not a vice or moral delinquency that we have to deal with, but a state of opinion.' It is the recognition of this dimension that is so often missing from the poverty and apathy stereotypes.

These findings influenced the commissioners' treatment of the problem of attendance. They concluded that most parents appreciated education, that they chose to withdraw their children once literate and that the standard of satisfactory attendance should indeed be 'the standard which the respectable part of the [working] class set up by their conduct.' On these grounds and a more doctrinaire respect for 'the natural demands for labour' they opposed a general compulsion. The usual moralistic, censure was reserved for 'the most degraded part of the population'.

It is important not to romanticize these conclusions. It could be argued, with much truth, that the commission's measure of parental aspiration was used to lower the threshold of educational ambition and to justify a conception of elementary education as class-bound and even more limited than that of the 1830s. The more 'democratic' tone of the report and the typical mid-Victorian discovery of a 'respectable' working class should be set beside the unwillingness to intervene in the economy or to recognize continuing economic insecurities. The commission also over-looked the idealistic in favour of the pragmatic elements in working-class educational opinion. Even so, the report is unique in the collection in taking popular opinion at all seriously. In later discussions, including those of Cross, popular opinion, despite its contribution to 1870, disappears from view or re-assumes a stereotypical pattern. As a recent historian of policy in the 1870s and 1880s has put it, 'almost everyone assumed the apathy or active hostility of parents and children.'

#### The Reports and Policy-Making

We have attempted to show how unsatisfactory the reports are as documents about getting knowledge and about working people as educational actors. This was because inquiry belonged essentially to the providing classes and because the control of schooling, certainly up to 1870, very

faithfully reflected the class distributions of economic power and of access to political influence. We would also insist that resulting biases are central to understanding the contents of reports, that a closer study of popular attitudes is feasible though difficult and that it must of necessity change understanding of a more familiar story.

Obversely, the reports say a great deal about giving knowledge, or selling it, or administering it by main force. They introduce the worlds of managers, administrators and even teachers. They trace the growth of schooling and of its cumbrous infra-structures - educational theory, teacher training, state finance and control, national and later, local administration, educational law. But even here there should be some reservations or warnings. Much depends on the questions asked, the use to which the sources are put. In what follows three such uses will be discussed: the reports as a source for educational policy-making; as a way of examining the configuration of educational opinion; as a mine of general information about the schooling enterprise.

Historians of government policy may wish to disentangle the steps by which state power in education grew and to explain why government action took the forms it did. The reports seem especially germane to this theme. After all, they seem to record policy-making process. With a few exceptions, they make recommendations or were designed to do so. But a closer examination is needed of the reports as would-be policy-making activities and of the policies actually pursued by government.

Again the reports fall into three or four groups corresponding to phases in policy-making. Before the Education Department was created in 1839 there was no real focus for national policy. Decisions were taken locally, often influenced by metropolitan innovators. The two largest voluntary societies - the National and the British and Foreign - exercised some central control, though neither was as capable or as willing to direct operations as the general histories sometimes imply. Certainly the Church of England had a massive ecclesiastical apparatus which was increasingly put to educational uses, but the Anglican policy of engrossment, so successful from the 1830s to the 1870s, was always opposed by Dissent, by all kinds of radicals and, not least, by liberal-minded politicians. Respect for religious liberty was partly the cause but the National Society was also rightly seen as a vehicle of social and political conservatism.

Even so, attempts were made to make national policy. The main drive came in the 1830s from loosely-connected groups of enthusiasts, middle-class, often professional, involved in philanthropy or statistical inquiry, interested in educational method at home and abroad, influenced by the doctrines of economic and political liberalism and sometimes already active as public servants in fields related to education. Many of the witnesses of the 1830s were of this kind, giving evidence alongside the officials of the societies. Many were, like Professor Pillans, James Simpson and Dorsey, from Scotland; many more, like Kay and Henry Brougham, were educated there. They often had allies in Parliament, active members of the reformed House of Commons like Thomas Wyse, Roebuck and Slaney. Some had connections with Whig magnate families which had lately come to power, especially with Lord John Russell and Lord Lansdowne.

In other fields of government, innovative policies can be traced directly to men like these. Their main instrument was the Royal Commission of Inquiry. In the Poor Law, in factory legislation and in matters of police and local government the impetus generated by commission often proved decisive. An examination of the reports themselves often throws a direct light on policy-making. Recommendation tended to pass into law.

In education it was different. The inquiries of 1816-18, 1834-35 and 1838 were failures in the special sense that they did not determine the direction of policy. Of the four main items of the Brougham plan, two failed entirely (an educational commission of inquiry and the plan for parochial schools on the Scottish model), one passed only in an emasculated form (the Charity Commission) and the fourth was delayed fifteen years (building grants for schools resuscitated by Brougham and the Whig ministry in 1833).<sup>85</sup> The 1834-35 Committee failed to report anything of substance except its evidence.<sup>86</sup> Slaney's draft report of 1838, itself a modest version of a bigger plan, was whittled down to platitudes by the opposing High Church group on the committee.<sup>87</sup> Slaney's intervention certainly influenced the creation of the Committee of Council in 1839, but was just one of the accumulating pressures that forced the Whig ministers to act. The form of action owed little to previous public debate. Though the plan for a state normal school was on the lines approved by educational experts, it was soon scotched by Anglican opposition. Though the favoured inspection of schools was also adopted, it took a curious hybrid form, most inspectors also being clerics of the Church of England. In all this, and in the constitutional shape of the Committee of Council itself, the real politik of Church and State was more immediately influential than the ideas busily canvassed since 1818.<sup>88</sup>

If public inquiry was peripheral to policy up to 1839, it was still more marginal in the decade of Kay's secretaryship. Some of the great inquiries of the 1840s bore on educational matters, especially the Commissions on Children's Employment and Handloom Weaving. Despite its title the latter became very much an investigation into education and the surrounding penumbra of 'moral' issues.<sup>89</sup> The Children's Employment Commission may have provided some of the impetus for Sir James Graham's ill-fated educational clauses of 1843.<sup>90</sup> More typically policy was secreted in the Council Office and inquiry was systematically connected to this departmental activity. The Welsh Commission was typical of this phase. Although it derived from a parliamentary motion, Kay used the commissioners very much as he sought to use his early inspectors - to publicize educational deficiencies and to hammer away at the need for civilizing schools and missionary teachers. The Minutes of 1846, the next big step in educational policy, owed little to public inquiry and report and almost all to Kay and the inspectorate. The secretary learned by trial and error, using the political space won by seven years of tact and collaboration.

Kay's removal from office in 1849 marked the beginning of a third phase which lasted until the 1860s. The department ceased to be a source of major initiatives, while attempts by pressure groups and individual members of Parliament to make policy by other routes were frustrated. This impasse mainly affected the education of the 'independent' working class. In other areas, especially technical education or the treatment of criminal and destitute children, there were important innovations.<sup>92</sup> But in elementary education, thus defined, lines of policy remained essentially those of 1846, undercut in 1862 by the Revised Code.

The causes of this situation were complex and have been discussed elsewhere.<sup>93</sup> They had to do both with a tendency towards bureaucracy in the department itself and the unwillingness of politicians, scarred from previous battles, to make the religious denominations. In this situation, the Newcastle Commission was uniquely placed to make a major contribution.

In some ways, it was indeed the most influential educational inquiry of the century. But it was influential in a peculiar way. In large part the familiar pattern of frustration was repeated. Few recommendations

passed into practice. The schemes for borough and county rates and boards fell flat. The very emphatic proposals about amalgamating the work of Education Department and Charity Commission remained dead letters until the creation of the Board of Education 1899-1903.<sup>94</sup> Even sensible minor proposals like those dealing with the education of outdoor paupers were neglected.<sup>95</sup> Instead the commission's more general findings were used to justify policies of restriction towards which political and departmental opinion was moving anyway. The commission provided educational arguments in favour of payment by results and the reduction of grant-aid system and paved the way for the Revised Code. It provided a set of excuses for policies that were prepared in the office and which were heavily influenced by the Gladstonian climate of financial retrenchment.<sup>96</sup>

The major change of the mid 1860s was that politicians replaced administrators as the effective policy-makers. More accurately, the climate of educational opinion changed so as to allow the department's political leadership to exercise a responsibility it had always, in theory, possessed. As legislation became thinkable, initiative passed from the permanent officials to those involved in parliamentary and general politics. Most of the major changes in educational policy from 1870 onwards can be ascribed to particular politicians. Forster was very much the author of the 1870 Act while recent work has shown the key roles of Sandon, Salisbury, Acland and Mundella in the years that followed.<sup>97</sup>

The Cross Commission has to be viewed in this context. It originated in the desire of the Conservative government to do something to aid voluntary schools, and its membership was heavily weighted in that direction. But once again, its influence on subsequent policy is doubtful, partly because it was so deeply divided in its recommendations, partly because decisions were taken by the politicians in the light of educational propriety and political advantage. The commission was most influential, perhaps in hastening the dismantling of payment by results, an issue on which the commissioners and the bulk of the witnesses were unanimous.<sup>99</sup>

Unlike the great commissions of the 1830s, the reports in this collection were not central to the policy-making process. Policy-making in education was more clandestine; before Forster's Act even Parliament was often by-passed by the department's un-parliamentary constitution and its ability to 'legislate' by minute. In terms of historical sources, this puts a premium on the records of the Education Department and other departments concerned with education (printed and unprinted),<sup>100</sup> upon sources which reveal negotiation between government and interested parties, and above all upon the private and political correspondence between Kay and Lingen and their political superiors and among the politicians themselves.<sup>101</sup>

Against this, it could be argued that the reports contain the public interrogation of policy-makers, especially of the civil servants. Kay gave evidence to Slaney's committee shortly before he became secretary and also to Newcastle. Lingen was a Welsh Commissioner and a witness before Newcastle, Argyll, the Select Committee of 1861 and at least two other select committees. He appeared before Cross, eighteen years after he had left the Education Department for the Treasury. Lingen's successor, Francis Sandford, was himself a Cross Commissioner; Cumin, who followed him, gave voluminous evidence. Many inspectors of schools and other minor officials gave public testimony.<sup>102</sup>

This is often useful. In 1838 Kay sketched out his ideal policy including rate aid and teacher training before it was modified by the controversies of 1839-40 and Whig caution. Lingen's Welsh report provides a unique insight into his views on education as opposed to the administration of it. More often, however, accounts of policy-making are retrospective, usually recollected at some distance. They are often disappointing. Kay's account of 1839-1849 to Newcastle was positively misleading, partly because it was so self-effacing. We learn little about his role in the normal school plan of 1839, in the educational clauses of 1843, or the major though abortive initiative of the Aberdeen Coalition in 1853, for which, though no longer secretary, he was largely responsible. His account of the creation of the Committee of Council in 1839 was confused and in obvious matters of fact, incorrect. As in his Autobiography he was misleading too in his account of the origins of the Minutes of 1846. Only in his general characterisation of policy-making as a tentative and gradual process of learning by mistakes is his evidence really useful.

Lingen's evidence is also disappointing but for different reasons. He was too much the civil servant and too conscious of the explosiveness of educational issues to give more away than was necessary to make his point. Checked against contemporary evidence, his statement that the Revised Code derived mainly from Newcastle is too simplified to be convincing. Nor, from his public evidence, do we get the full flavour of his personal distaste for the denominational system and its voluntary organisation and his wish that it should be done away with as soon as something more rational could have a hope of working. It would have been suicidal to declare himself a 'secularist', though this was what, in contemporary jargon, he really was. His caution before Newcastle can be compared with the candour of Frederick Temple. Having left the Education Department for the headmastership of Rugby, Temple was quite prepared to enlarge upon a policy of secularization. Just as the volatility of educational politics cramped policy itself, so it inhibited revelations before public inquiries.

There are, however, two useful exceptions - the Select Committees of 1864 (Inspector's Reports) and of 1865-66 (Constitution of the Committee of Council on Education). Neither have been reprinted in the IUP series but they are interesting examples of Commons' inquiry in a probing, quasi-judicial mood. They operated against the recent background of the unpopularity of the Revised Code, an inspectoral revolt against Lowe's and Lingen's policies and even a whiff of departmental scandal over the censoring of inspectors' reports. Members included unrepentant opponents of the department, especially Lord Robert Cecil, who were quite prepared to grill witnesses. This proved especially revealing since the committee (unlike the education series) interrogated politicians as well as civil servants. The reports allow us to recreate the distribution of authority within the department and they throw more light on the origins of the Revised Code than any other public source.

#### The Reports and Educational Opinion.

There is a danger of taking too narrow a view of policy-making or of seeing 'influence' in too mechanical or too biographical a way. Those directly responsible for decisions, on a national plane, worked within a context. In education this context was especially wide. It was difficult for officials or politicians to create for themselves areas of immunity, more difficult than in relatively technical matters like the control of pollution of the air, the prevention of accidents in factories, or even the curing of disease. Education belonged rather to a class of public questions (like the relief of poverty) where

ideology was most intrusive and aspirations to science largely specious. Kay and Lingen, of course, attempted to define areas of special authority, Kay by stressing a pedagogic expertise, Lingen by concentrating on his administrative and bureaucratic imperatives.<sup>115</sup> But though they defended themselves to some extent from controversy, they could not remove its causes. The basic condition of policy-making was the divisiveness of issues and their capacity to create passion, polemic and struggle.

It has become customary to ascribe this to 'the religious difficulty', as though religion was, as A.V. Dicey might have classed it, a kind of 'cross-current' affecting a more normal pattern of 'law-making opinion'.<sup>116</sup> No-one, especially having read the reports that spend so much time on it, could deny the importance of religious division in English education. But religion was neither a unique nor an autonomous influence; it was often the vehicle of other basic differences. The secularization of society has not, after all, led to a decline in educational controversy.

Another way of analysing nineteenth-century educational problems is in terms of the tension of contradictory impulses. Most educators wished to Christianize the working class, identifying Christian morality with secular virtue. But they could not agree in what true Christianity lay. Could it be captured in formularies or secured by allegiance to a particular church? Or did it spring, through grace, from access to the Scriptures? Or did it repose in some frame of mind, the beliefs common to all Christians, or in an ethical practice?<sup>117</sup> Education was seen, especially in the 1830s but recurrently thereafter, as a source of social and political stability. Schoolteachers could anticipate the work of Radicals, Socialists or Trade Unions.<sup>118</sup> But educators were not entirely agreed on the form that society or politics should take.<sup>119</sup> They were pulled between more or less conservative and liberal ideals. Conservatives feared, indeed, that certain kinds of knowledge too lavishly bestowed without controlling guarantees might actually foster agitation, or artificially raised expectations that could never be satisfied. Liberals repeatedly celebrated the death of these attitudes, but they none the less persisted.<sup>120</sup> Some believed that education would intellectually equip an industrial work-force; many more saw it as a source of work-discipline, time-thrift or rational economic behaviour.<sup>121</sup> At the same time both agriculture and the industrial economy rested on a base of child, female and adolescent labour, placing school and work in competition.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, though industrialization eventually supplied the means to erode mass poverty, the labour of children was long required to supplement family incomes. When seen from below this created a paradox that was stark indeed. As the Poor Man's Guardian put it, reflecting on the phenomenon of the charity school:

You have starved the father and the mother, and then take the babe to rescue it from want, crime, ignorance, and nakedness, consequent on living at home.<sup>123</sup>

Then again, launching the schooling enterprise and still more achieving a general coverage, required massive finance.<sup>124</sup> But taxing the propertied to supply it long remained unthinkable. A central control of education was feared as a threat to Anglican prerogatives, or for its secularizing tendencies, or from a long, rich libertarian tradition. But the obvious, Lingenesque solution of 'decentralization on to really responsible shoulders' (i.e. secular local authorities) was resisted till 1870 from a similar tangle of motives.<sup>125</sup> Again, from the 1820s to the 1880s fees were very generally charged for schooling and educators stressed the moral value, to the parent, of payment. They also emphasized ('exceptions' apart) the duty of parent to child, censuring it in the neglect. Yet the parent was denied a direct say in the content of schooling which, even after 1870, was reserved to more

'responsible' parties. <sup>126</sup>

Throughout the period, the treatment of children deemed 'exceptional' was less controversial. Few disagreed that the state of philanthropy stood in loco parentis for orphaned, destitute, criminal, pauper or (an ill-defined category) <sup>127</sup> vagrant children. Even the Newcastle minority conceded the principle. But even here there were differences of approach. Some favoured a deterrent or quasi-penal treatment, stressing 'less-eligibility', usually favouring law and state institutions; others, commonly the philanthropists, stressed rehabilitation and moral rescue. The Select Committee of 1861 revolved around this disagreement with particular reference to <sup>128</sup> the ragged school child, and resolved it in favour of the hard men. A more humane programme, for pauper children at least, had to await the Departmental Committee of 1896. It abandoned belief in empauperisation, less-eligibility and a separate treatment in favour of treating pauper children more <sup>129</sup> like ordinary children and outside the barracks of the district schools.

Concerted action would have been impossible without some broad areas of agreement. For most of the century it was accepted (by all but working-class Radicals and a few 'eccentrics' like Robert Owen and the phrenologist James Simpson) <sup>130</sup> that elementary education equalled working-class education and that it should be confined to narrow limits. After the post-war thaw, reading, writing and simple arithmetic were admitted to the curriculum of the elementary school together with an essential ingredient usually associated with religion ('religion and morals') and concerned with the shaping of behaviour and the child's affective nature. More progressive educators always tried to push beyond <sup>131</sup> this limit and by the end of the century were achieving some successes, but beyond literacy and 'morals' controversy was liable to break out. The typical recurring charges <sup>132</sup> were those of 'over-education' and the neglect of elementary subjects. Most educators also saw schooling as essentially regulative, though they differed on the best source of restraint. Secularists favoured a knowledge of natural or economic law, <sup>133</sup> Churchmen and many dissenters stressed theologically-derived sanctions. <sup>134</sup> Some educators favoured punishment, others reward, others 'emulation'. The educational experts of the 1830s looked to <sup>135</sup> a kindly but 'civilizing' relationship between teacher and children. But for celebrations of learning as secular liberation or as the development of hidden potentialities we have to look outside the reported orthodoxies.

The greatest value of the reports is in disentangling opinion on issues like these and charting areas of consensus. This is relevant to the study of policy-making and even of 'administrative history'. But the reports could also be used to study, say, attitudes to children, to poverty or to class. Schooling touched so many salient dilemmas and was so fertile in points of principle and prejudice that it provides an excellent vehicle for the study of ideology. Here the selectivity of the reports and their social enclosed-ness is more of an asset than a disadvantage. Speaking to their own kind on uncontroverted issues, wearing biases on their sleeves in a Romantic, pre-Marxian, pre-Freudian era, witnesses before the early inquiries can be astonishingly self-revealing. What on earth (raising twentieth-century children on Spock and play-groups) are we to make of another of Wilderspin's statements ? !

I have had many instances where I have had to correct a child of only 12 months old; and in Wigan there was a little creature that could not speak, and yet domineered over the child that carried it about, and when it came to school it would not sit by itself; it wanted always to be on the back of the other, and I saw at once that I must enforce obedience. I had to whip it twice. It was only 15 months old; and then I had that very child at a public examination, before at least 350 auditors, and the child put out its arms to me and kissed me, and every person present was astonished. <sup>136</sup> It only proved you cannot begin too early to train a human being.

## Other Uses

The reports are most likely to be used for the light they throw on national or local aspects of schooling. Someone studying education in a particular locality, for example, may find it covered by an assistant commissioner, or may wish to use the statistical series compiled by Brougham, Newcastle, Argyll or the Welsh Commission. He may find that some local activist gave evidence before a select committee or wrote in to a commission. The really big surveys - Newcastle, Argyll or Cross - are especially useful in these respects and it is always worth searching indexes.

There is no substitute for the close examination of local educational sources even though, in the voluntary era especially, they are scattered and fragmentary. Nor can these Blue Books supply the necessary material on regional economies and societies. But it is still possible to under-utilize these stock sources for educational historians. This is especially true of the statistical material. An overall chronology of the spread of schooling, especially before 1870, is badly needed and it is surprising that educational history has not supplied it. We should know more too about the regional distributions of schooling or the relative strengths of different kinds of schools as between, for example agricultural and industrial counties, metropolitan areas and those more distant from London, well-provided regions like the far North and those where provided schooling was relatively weak like Wales. We need more studies of the social and economic geography of schooling and of school use. The contemporary estimates, not only Brougham and Newcastle, but also the Kerry returns of 1835, Mann's educational census of 1851 and, where relevant, the statistical society series, are a useful point of departure. It is true they are full of technical pitfalls and that there is nothing in a statistical series that makes it exempt from bias.<sup>137</sup> It is probable, for instance, that the quality of returns from local agents is very uneven. The clerical returns of the Brougham series (useful incidentally in all kinds of more literary ways) certainly under-estimate the extent of non-Anglican provision in large urban parishes, partly because of antipathy to Dissent, partly because a clergyman might be ignorant of many forms of provision in a teeming population.<sup>138</sup> There are difficulties in the definition of different kinds of schools, in the definition of a 'school' itself, in different criteria of 'attendance' and in incompatibility between different series on these and other scores. But use for relatively modest purposes is certainly possible. One approach, in local studies, is to start from the general series, mapping some major educational variables, the overall chronology of growth, differences within the region and its typicality or otherwise compared with a national pattern. Results can then be compared with the findings of research on local sources which may give some measure of the inadequacies of the general series, especially their tendency to under-record.<sup>139</sup> This would certainly be an advance on present tendencies either to make ambitious global calculations with tricky data, or to eschew use altogether through excessive scepticism.<sup>140</sup>

Perhaps, in the last resort, the opposite vice is more alluring - regarding the reports as compendia of educational information, carrying a special authority. Certainly the reports themselves often encourage this attitude. They breathe the Victorian faith in 'fact', a rather naive assumption of objectivity and a belief that truth most often emerges from the infinite accumulation of instances. Assistant commissioners were told to concentrate on 'fact' and avoid 'opinion'.<sup>141</sup> Assistant Commissioner Wilkinson's formulation was characteristic:

I have endeavoured simply to investigate facts. I have neither permitted my mind to be influenced by any controversial bias, nor have I adopted any theory whatever upon any question relating to popular education.<sup>142</sup>

Stances of impartiality like this were betrayed on every following page.

On the contrary, of course, the reports were emphatically political documents. The educational politics of class was always present, together with a politics derived more from the internal divisions of orthodoxy. The reports were designed as much to persuade as to discover. They were also, in the opinions recorded, biased towards the active portions of middle and upper class opinion. They were forums of the committed, the philanthropic and the anxious and do not necessarily represent the whole range of even propertied opinion.

This ordering and marshalling of 'fact' was not confined to the substantive reports themselves, to the actual recommendations and their supporting arguments, though it is here that the political intent is easiest to detect. The Newcastle Commission, for instance, received in its written evidence, a large volume of support for the continuation or even extension of something like the existing grant aid system.<sup>143</sup> But its conclusions were informed by the reports of untypical assistant commissioners like Fraser and by Lingen's formidable case about administrative complication.<sup>144</sup> The political dimension is plain too where the inquiring body was itself divided. Slaney's Select Committee, for instance, split along the liberal - Tory Anglican rift. The chairman, by calling a class of expert witness dominated the proceedings of the inquiry itself, but conservative obstruction prevented this evidence from being embodied in recommendations.<sup>145</sup> The Committee of 1861 canvassed rival reports and recorded patterns of voting on the issue of state aid to ragged schools.<sup>146</sup> But political intent extended to every aspect of inquiry, including the choice of investigators. The Education Department in 1858, for example, was determined that Newcastle should contain no pronounced friend of the existing system and to judge from the final membership (including the exclusion of Sir John Pakington from whose parliamentary motion the commission derived) Lingen's advice was followed.<sup>147</sup> Even the choice of witnesses and the actual processes of interrogation were, in part, manipulative. It is an interesting exercise, where the names of questioners are given, to identify cases for defence and prosecution as it were, in sessions with particular witnesses.

This is not to suggest that members of inquiries never changed their minds, nor, as has been stressed throughout, that biases prevent any use whatever. The internal and external politics of the inquiries are an important part of the whole educational story. But neglect of this dimension can produce a large effect on the historiography. The Senior-Chadwick view of the old Poor Law presented in the Poor Law Commission Report of 1832 had a profound effect on poor law history. It is only quite recently that the report has been set in its ideological and political context and its findings and evidence more closely scrutinised.<sup>148</sup> One result of this has been a more accurate and sometimes more favourable view of the pre-1834 systems in all their variety.

No one report in education carried this kind of authority. The historical dominance of a single version, compelling, coherent but incomplete, should be easier to avoid.

This is a Critical Commentary on the Education (Poorer Classes) volumes and those volumes dealing with Elementary Education in the Education (General) set of the British Parliamentary Papers Series published by the Irish University Press

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(The paper also included the following sections, which are not included here, but which are consultable from R.J.)

Footnotes

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