

THE SCHOOL AND THE NATION.

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Everything the British Government originates and arranges for the people of Ireland may not be calculated by the English themselves to injure our welfare or retard our progress, but there cannot be the shadow of a doubt concerning the evils that have followed, and are still resulting from the wholesale acceptance of systems of English education by all classes and creeds of our people.

While public education was forbidden the majority of the nation, and while the Irish language was widely spoken, the people retained a keen and vivid sense of their wrongs and of the artificial limitations placed upon them in every walk of life. They were able to distinguish Ireland's friends from her foes, and her interests from those of her rival, England.

Catholic Emancipation was followed by a system of primary education which was cunningly designed to destroy our nationality. Its originators did not formally teach that Ireland, her language, literature, history, and industry, were unworthy of the attention even of Irish children, and consequently of the Irish people; but, by ignoring them, and by concerning Irish education with the affairs of England, and of her Empire, they attained the desired result quite as effectually, and without the arousal of suspicion among the masses, or among the teachers or school managers, - indeed the general fear was that there would be any difficulty or delay in doing as our British masters wished us to do, viz., to get rid of every trace of our nationality, from our speech and accent to our Irish clothing and food.

The Intermediate system, planned and worked to make the children of the middle classes really "respectable," we accepted also without demur. It had nothing to show that it was a system of secondary education suited to the needs and peculiarities of this country. It would not have suited any country on the face of the globe. It was designed to complete the destruction of national ideals, but it was arranged with such little regard for correct educational principles

in the abstract that it inevitably led also to the destruction of mental powers and capacity for the acquirement of knowledge. Ireland, after the long night of the Penal Laws, needed special educational treatment.

The tradition of school life and of teaching had been broken and the high ideals of the early Gaels who fostered each other's children had been lost sight of. Religion itself had fallen on evil days, and our people, through poverty and the evils and shame of subjection, had lost not knowledge only, but many of the noblest traits of the race also. To raise a fallen nation, to give its people knowledge, ideals, dignity, and national pride, was the work that should have been begun after the cessation of religious persecution. But there was no educationalist in power with either the wisdom or patriotism to teach young Ireland how to respect herself, or to defend. Instead, there were in office nation destroyers and mind murderers who planned for the further degradation of an already degraded and impoverished people. The Penal Swords were the sword that struck down the strong man; but the educational systems originated and directed for us by foreigners during the past century under English control were the slow poison administered to the enfeebled and unsuspecting wounded warrior.

Those evil systems are still with us, and although teachers and managers are no longer the willing tools of the anglicisers, evil results continue to follow from systems that were never planned for Ireland's good. They are still in the main unconcerned with Ireland. Those who direct them are content to follow the slow meandering march of English educationalists. The state of education in the United States is by no means ideal, but Dr. McNamara, a prominent English educationalist, declared a few years ago that American schools and teachers were fifty years ahead of those of England. In educational matters, at least, we must have independence, and freedom to work out our own ideas, and strive for our own ideals. The Intermediate system turns the schools that adopt it into educational mills which earn money for their owners, but at the cost of national genius and of Irish originality and genius. The programme of the Intermediate Board, no less than the Board itself, needs instant and radical reform.

Of this need there is a growing consciousness amongst those who are deeply interested and concerned in Ireland's educational welfare. Last week the Most Rev. Dr. O'Dwyer, Bishop of Limerick, dealt severely but sensibly with the methods that prevail in the Intermediate. He said: -

“If a bureau in Dublin was to have control at all of all of the schools of the country inspection was about the best way they could exercise it. The system of an annual examination in writing simultaneously in every school in the country, and exactly identical, was a retrograde and an antediluvian system for managing the education of a country. He could not conceive anything better calculated to bring about the results that the Intermediate system brought about in Ireland, of cramming and deadening the intelligence of the boys and girls. The only other country in which examinations were conducted entirely by writing was the Empire of China, but China was now progressing and was throwing over the old literary examinations. The inspection examined the education of a school as consisting of living processes for the development of the child all round – to give it “mens sana in corpore sana.” The written examination system simply meant testing the amount of information that might be got into a child's mind in a certain time, and could be expressed on paper. Those two systems exclude one another. One of them would have to go. He hoped it would be the written examination system, which was a gross absurdity. As regards competitive examination, they were good enough for the civil service or things of that kind, but as a test for the ordinary education of children the system was a preposterous humbug, and under it the children would be racing against each other instead of being educated properly. What his lordship would like to do was to let every school teach what it liked, and teach it in his own way – let every school work out its own salvation, strike out its own course of studies, and if they had that they would have a real emancipation over Irish schools, and would have in a generation a greater development of Irish ability than they had for the last 30 years under the Intermediate system. When the children's education was completed they might have a leaving examination to see finally what amount of scholarship and developed ability the schools had produced in the children while they were there, and that final examination might well be conducted under the auspices of our new National University.”

This is a courageous lead from an able and responsible man, one who is no unwise revolutionary, but a respecer and guardian of tradition and of authority. When will those who control our secondary schools follow?