

## ABSTRACT

Until it attracted the attention of D.H. Akenson (Professor of History at Queen's University, Kingston, since 1974), the writing of Irish educational history was moribund, amateurish, and narrow both in scope and sympathy. The essay reviews the literature in this field and assesses the importance of Dr. Akenson's contribution.

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**The Historiography of Irish Education: A Review Essay**

The history of education in Ireland has traditionally been linked to teacher education programs. It has been, and still is, viewed as a part of this professional training rather than a specialized branch of history. Accordingly, much of the writing in this field, particularly in the early part of the century, was the work of individuals attached to university education departments.

The first Professor of Education at University College, Dublin, the Rev. Timothy Corcoran S.J., who held the post from 1909 until 1942,<sup>1</sup> as the most influential figure in the early years of Irish educational history writing. His works exhibited not only a peculiarly Catholic bias but also strong nationalistic tendencies. In fact there seems to have been a distinct purpose in all he wrote - the glorification of the old Gaelic culture and the castigation of Anglo-Protestant attempts to destroy it. Yet during his long and prolific writing life he produced no major synthesis of Irish educational history. His two most important books on the subject - *State Policy in Irish Education A.D. 1536-1816 (1916)* and *Selected Texts on Educational Systems in Ireland from the Close of the Middle Ages (1928)*, are collections of documents put together for the benefit mainly of his students. In a sense it could be said that Corcoran was more a compiler of documents than a historian as even his articles tend to rely on lengthy quotations from the sources.<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that he was either unwilling or unable to comment on the documents. He certainly was, but in a rather crude, polemical style which has been termed 'unfortunate'.<sup>3</sup>

Corcoran's place in Irish educational historiography is nevertheless assured as the modern discoverer of the virtues of the hedge schools - the illegal Catholic pay schools of the Penal era.<sup>4</sup> He viewed these schools as valiant institutions struggling to keep alive the traditions and culture of ancient Gaelic Ireland which he admired so much and he was anxious to show the high level of learning which they had achieved for the peasantry. He was equally adamant in his denunciation of all efforts by the government to either suppress, control or replace these schools.

To the modern reader, Corcoran is less than convincing. In the first place, a blatant anti-Protestant, anti-English prejudice colours his writings and his frequent use of intemperate language in denouncing all he opposed is suggestive of propaganda rather than history. Even his admirers were not unaware of this fault, one admitting that in him "the apologetic instinct . . . might have outweighed the judicial sense which must ever be the historian's crown".<sup>5</sup> Perhaps a good example of this tendency is Corcoran's description of the Dublin parliament as "the corrupt and brutal, subservient and slavish Legislature that committed suicide in 1800".<sup>6</sup>

His anti-English bias also led Corcoran into an almost conspiratorial interpreta-

tion of history. All legislation emanating from the government, regardless of how well-intentioned, was viewed as part of a continuing plot to undermine Irish culture and Catholicism. For instance, the relief measure of 1793, which allowed Catholics to take degrees at Trinity College — a reasonable concession which Oxford and Cambridge were not to make for decades — was seen by Corcoran as a Protestant scheme to seduce Catholics from their faith. As he put it in his own inimical style:<sup>7</sup>

From 1793 to 1873, when Catholics were exposed to this special and skillfully devised temptation to perversion, many more of them sacrificed their faith than all that were made perverts of between 1592 and 1793.

Even the Education Bill of 1799, which sought to provide quality education for the lower classes, was vilified. The work of R.L. Edgeworth, and a remarkably enlightened document for its day, it was nevertheless condemned by Corcoran as part of a state conspiracy to take over the “popular schools of Catholic Ireland” which were “highly efficient even in comparison with the best system of the time in any Continental area” and were “immensely superior” to the “miserable” Protestant system in England.<sup>8</sup>

A further weakness in Corcoran’s historiography was his reliance on travellers’ tales as his main source in documenting the quality of education in the hedge schools.<sup>9</sup> This was the approach taken in the section devoted to the schools in *Selected Texts on Education Systems in Ireland from the Close of the Middle Ages*. It consisted of fourteen brief passages from books mainly written by English travellers in Ireland in which they commented on the surprisingly high level of learning achieved by certain peasants through their schools.<sup>10</sup> Corcoran avoided comment here, but the conclusion for the reader was implied: that the Catholic population was quite capable of educating itself without assistance from either Protestant societies or the state. This of course was explicitly stated by Corcoran in many of his articles<sup>11</sup> but the image is hardly an honest one. Travellers’ tales are a notoriously unreliable source of information and must be treated by the historian with great caution. In some ways this amateurishness is forgivable, but Corcoran’s omission of the many unfavourable accounts of the hedge schools and their teachers which are extant constitutes an almost deliberate falsification of history.<sup>12</sup>

Corcoran’s credibility is further weakened by his use of sweeping statements unsupported by even a shred of evidence. In several articles, for instance, he claimed that educational standards in general were lowered between 1830 and 1860 as the hedge schools were replaced by those of the National system.<sup>13</sup> This favorite notion of his goes completely unsubstantiated and it is even doubtful if he engaged in any original research on the National schools.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these peculiarities Corcoran remained an influential figure in Irish educational historiography, not only through his own writings, but also through those of his students, in particular the Rev. Martin Brennan and P.J. Dowling who carried on in the same tradition.

Brennan, who was Professor of Education at Maynooth, produced his magnum opus, *Schools of Kildare and Leighlin* in 1935.<sup>15</sup> In some respects an admirable and necessary piece of research, it looked at Catholic schools in the diocese of Kildare and Leighlin between 1775 and 1835 using the parochial returns as the primary source. Brennan followed in Corcoran’s footsteps in trying to show the extent and quality of Catholic education in this period compared with that provided by the

Protestant churches. Nor was he adverse to the habit of his mentor in using partisan language — e.g. “the notorious Kildare Place Society”.<sup>16</sup> Even his handling of the sources was similar. The book consists mainly of extensive quotations from documents, including lists of teachers, schools and schoolbooks, linked together with occasional narrative. There was no real effort to turn these raw materials of history into a finished product. It remains a source book more than anything else, and one even suspects that Brennan’s selection of the material was not always scrupulously fair. Things were never as black and white as Corcoran and Brennan would have us believe.

Corcoran’s doctrines were propagated even more successfully by another of his students, P.J. Dowling, who studied under him for the Higher Diploma in Education and M.A. at University College, Dublin between 1912 and 1914. Dowling later became lecturer in education at St. Mary’s Training College, London and conducted research on the hedge schools for a Ph.D. at London University.<sup>17</sup> His influential little volume, *The Hedge Schools of Ireland* (1935), was a product of this research. The influence of Corcoran is evident both in the orientation and methodology employed. Dowling’s purpose was to show that the hedge schools were outstanding educational institutions in their day and that they “compared favourably” with contemporary schools elsewhere in Europe. He put together his picture of the schools largely from comments made by various foreigners who travelled through Ireland in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some had expressed surprise at meeting peasants well-versed in the classical languages. Undoubtedly, instances of this phenomenon existed, but Dowling was inclined to conclude from this that the peasantry was highly educated and that the hedge schools were responsible for this situation.

One technique which he used to this end was the selective acceptance and rejection of testimony. For instance, some writers had noted the use of many unsavoury books as readers in the schools while others noted the presence of standard works of literature and history. As the schools did not constitute a uniform system but rather were organized on an ad hoc, private basis, and as there were no required textbooks, it seems logical to conclude that standards and reading matter varied immensely. But Dowling rejected the observations of the former writers as “manifestly unjust”<sup>18</sup> and concluded that “the schools had at their disposal a sufficient variety of books not only to enable practically every child to read, but also to give opportunities to many of them of acquiring a taste for literature and history.”<sup>19</sup> In fact Dowling only mentioned criticism of the schools from the sources in order to refute it — as, for instance, the comments of one of the Commissioners of the Board of Education in 1825, which were instantly rebutted with a string of anecdotes.<sup>20</sup>

It is the anecdotal approach to history which most characterizes Dowling’s work. Undoubtedly, this method has its uses, but is hardly sufficient in itself. It adds colour, but no real substance to the historical picture and can never be the foundation upon which a work is based. Consequently, many of the important questions which spring to mind in considering this topic went unanswered or even unasked by Dowling. He mentioned, for instance, that Irish was the main language of instruction in the hedge schools during the eighteenth century but that by the beginning of the nineteenth century English was replacing it. What role did the schools play in this process? Were they a major agent in giving a knowledge of English to the peasantry? What of the social, economic and political circumstances surrounding the decline of Irish? These issues were not examined. To say that Irish merely dec-

lined in a book of this nature is hardly satisfactory.

And there are broader questions which should not have been overlooked. What was the general purpose of a hedge school education? Why the emphasis on the classics? Did the schools contribute to social mobility in any way? This type of analysis was never attempted. Instead, we have a litany of anecdotes designed to show at once that the hedge school was a widespread institution offering an excellent education despite official proscription.

The tradition of educational historiography established by Timothy Corcoran had two primary characteristics: its methodology was amateurish — relying on anecdotes and extensive quotations from the sources, and it perceived history as propaganda for the twin causes of Catholicism and Irish nationalism. It was a perspective which held sway in education departments of the National University for several decades and even today it still survives in places. But it was not the sole competitor in the field. The education department in Trinity College, Dublin produced a rival interpreter of history in the person of Dr. J.J. Auchmuty. His *Irish Education: A Historical Survey*<sup>21</sup> which appeared in 1937 was the first major attempt in the century to write a complete account of Irish educational history from the earliest of times. While he provided a welcome alternative interpretation of the past, his work nevertheless had much in common with that of the Corcoran school, as will soon become apparent.

Auchmuty's revisionist role first becomes evident in his treatment of the hedge schools. Relying mainly on Dowling's book and on the memoirs of Wm. Carlton, a schoolmaster whose *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* appeared in 1844, he constructed a reasonably balanced account recognizing the wide range of standards prevailing in the schools, with cruelty and drunkenness as much a reality as scholarship. He was also prepared to assign a considerable role to the hedge schools in the decline of the Irish language<sup>22</sup> — surely heresy to some of his contemporaries.

Auchmuty's assessment of the National school system also differed from that of Corcoran and his followers. It was, however, unsatisfactory both in scope and emphasis. One might have expected that a system of state-sponsored, non-denominational elementary schools set up in Ireland almost forty years before a similar arrangement in England would deserve fairly intensive analysis. But Auchmuty skimmed over it in a lengthy chapter on the life and times of Sir Thomas Wyse, a Catholic intellectual who championed the cause of non-sectarian education in the first half of the nineteenth century. Wyse was depicted as "by far the most considerable figure in the whole history of Irish education"<sup>23</sup> and his intellectual gifts and liberal attitudes were given lavish praise. Auchmuty's contention that the National school system was the original brainchild of Wyse<sup>24</sup> has now been shown to be false by D.H. Akenson in his definitive study *The Irish Education Experiment*.<sup>25</sup> But one of Auchmuty's several aims in this book seems to have been to draw attention to Wyse's contribution to education which he perceived to have been forgotten. One feels that he would have been better employed in writing a biography of Wyse rather than a general history of Irish education, almost one third of which was devoted to the work of one man.

Auchmuty's tendency to distortion and inaccuracy went even further and a distinct Protestant bias is evident throughout much of his work. For instance, Presbyterian and Anglican objections to the mixed principle of the National system were barely mentioned<sup>26</sup> and one could conclude that they played no role in the transformation of the schools to denominationalism. The blame for this The blame

even in the topics that follow - scholarships to post-primary schools, Irish in the primary school, the management of National schools, the school leaving age, teacher training today - the discussion in each case is preceded by a brief historical overview. A similar format is retained in dealing with secondary, vocational and university education.

McElligott offers nothing new to historical interpretation. His work is largely dependent on secondary sources and he readily acknowledges his debt to "the specialized work of others".<sup>32</sup> Yet he manages to advance some dubious notions - e.g. that when National schools replaced hedge schools in the nineteenth century, standards in classics and mathematics generally deteriorated.<sup>33</sup> But it is impossible to determine his source for this and other ideas, as the book is poorly documented throughout. It offers no answers to those who wish to view educational structures within the broader social, cultural and political context. The historical component throughout never rises above a chronicle of educational legislation.

Far more important is Norman Atkinson's *Irish Education: A History of Educational Institutions*<sup>34</sup> which appeared in 1969 - the first real attempt at a general history since Auchmuty. As it was followed shortly by a similar publication from P.J.Dowling - *A History of Irish Education: A Study of Conflicting Loyalties* (1971)<sup>35</sup> - they are best examined together.

Both books are essentially histories of schools from the earliest times. In Dowling in particular there is a tendency almost to list different types of schools and when they were founded - parish schools, diocesan schools, royal schools, classical schools, Erasmus Smith schools, charter schools, English schools - these are but some of the institutions whose stories are told.

Atkinson is also prone to this anecdotal approach, as for instance when he lists the Irish colleges on the continent<sup>36</sup> or in his treatment of the hedge schools for which he depends on Dowling's publication of 1935 and on the writings of Timothy Corcoran. But he at least makes some effort to place educational developments within the broader social, ideological and political context. For example, he relates the relaxation of the Penal Laws to the decline of the Jacobite threat to the English throne.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, he attributes the cooperation of the Catholic Church and the state in setting up the National school system to mutual fear of revolutionary propaganda emanating from the continent.<sup>38</sup> He also recognizes the effects of liberalism and the revolutions of 1848 on the outlook of the Church, especially as personified by Pope Pius IX and Archbishop Cullen of Dublin.<sup>39</sup>

This type of perspective is completely missing in Dowling. The Relief Act of 1782 appeared out of nowhere<sup>40</sup> and the National school system arose from the deliberations of a select committee of the House of Commons in 1828.<sup>41</sup>

The contrast between both writers is again evident in their treatment of secondary education developments in the nineteenth century. Dowling presents the reader with a deluge of 'facts' - lists of religious orders, the schools they founded and, of course, their great achievements. Atkinson goes beyond this, examining the impact of the 'Clerical monopoly' in education on the growth of a lay Catholic teaching profession.<sup>42</sup>

To compare these writers on twentieth century topics is impossible, as Dowling completely omits post-independence developments - possibly the greatest defect in his book. Atkinson accepts this challenge and even though he concentrates on legislation, curriculum and the reports of commissions, he does provide a com-

for this transformation was placed squarely and unjustly on the shoulders of the Catholic Archbishop of Tuam, John McHale who, "more than any other man . . . prepared the way for that insularity and particularism which is the curse of Ireland today"<sup>27</sup> Admittedly McHale opposed the introduction of the National schools in his Archdiocese but his influence was probably limited and was certainly tempered by that of Dr. Murray, the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin who sat on the National Board. Far more important in promoting intolerance and obscurantism on the Catholic side was Cardinal Cullen, but he was never even mentioned in the book. This serious omission is possibly explained by Auchmuty's reliance on a limited number of sources — in this case the Wyse papers, which do not cover the period of Cullen's episcopacy. In fact much of the distortion which appears throughout this work seems partly due to the limited sources employed, many of them secondary and of dubious value. For instance, Auchmuty borrowed uncritically from F. Hugh O'Donnell's polemical *The Ruin of Education in Ireland* (1902) in order to attack the Catholic clergy. A more objective picture of standards in Catholic schools could have been obtained by examining the records of the Intermediate Board's examinations. But this would have meant hard work and might not have yielded the conclusion which O'Donnell so readily provided.

Auchmuty's main contribution to educational history was probably in attempting to balance the equally distorted images emanating from Corcoran and his followers. But the differences between them are more apparent than real. All the writers in this period focussed narrowly on schools, handled their sources poorly and presented history as propaganda for a cause rather than an objective inquiry into the past. That Auchmuty's remained the only general work on Irish educational history for three decades is itself a statement on the sorry state of research in Ireland during this period. This is not to suggest that no historical works were being produced. They were — but they comprised mainly of amateur monographs relating the stories and achievements of individual schools and religious orders.<sup>28</sup>

This brings us to what might be termed the modern period in Irish educational history writing — roughly the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. It is a period in which the tempo of historical investigation again picks up, giving us some works of outstanding quality along with others showing that the old ideas still survive. One indication of both the renewed interest in educational history and the survival of the old historiography was the re-issuing of P.J. Dowling's *The Hedge Schools of Ireland* in paperback in 1968.<sup>29</sup> As it turned out, Dowling had even more to offer in the modern period. But before turning to that, a brief look at a book which appeared in 1966 is in order.

It is difficult to decide whether T.J. McElligott's *Education in Ireland*<sup>30</sup> should be included in a paper of this nature as its main concern is with the administration and functioning of the school system in the mid-1960s. Nonetheless, the author, a former teacher, suggests in his preface that it is in fact an historical work<sup>31</sup> and as its historical elements largely follow the conventional patterns of Irish educational historiography, it deserves mention.

McElligott deals only with formal institutions of learning and divides his format into four distinct units incorporating the principle components of Irish schooling: primary, secondary, vocational and university. Emphasis is on the contemporary period — the administrator's concern with the workings of the bureaucracy — rules, regulations, etc. However, each of the four major subdivisions is given an historical introduction of varying length. For instance, of the forty-nine pages devoted to primary education, the first twenty-three are essentially historical. And

mendable summary. His final assessment of the educational system in the Republic at the time of writing is most interesting. He draws attention to the xenophobic character of Irish education which penalizes study and experience abroad for its teachers, to the continued clerical domination, to divisions in the teaching profession which prevent a concerted effort at reform, and to a rigidity which discourages individual initiative and experimentation.<sup>43</sup>

Atkinson's is undoubtedly the superior general history. In it we find at least some effort to relate educational developments to their broader historical context. It is also infinitely more balanced and objective than anything produced by the old school. In a sense it might be said to indicate the direction Irish educational historiography was to take in the hands of D.H. Akenson whose works will be examined below. Dowling, on the other hand, has little new to offer. His approach to history remained the same since the 1930s - anecdote following anecdote spun together with a web of Catholic triumphalism.

It would be wrong to view Dowling's *History* as the swan song of the old historiography. It continues to find adherents today. Perhaps the most notable publication in this vein in recent times is *Post-Primary Education in Ireland 1957-1970* by Sister Eileen Randles<sup>44</sup> which made its appearance in 1975. Randles warns at the outset that her purpose was "to chronicle the changes which took place in the structure of Secondary and Vocational education in Ireland from 1957 to 1970..."<sup>45</sup> This is exactly what she does on a year-by-year basis, quoting extensively from her sources - speeches of various Ministers for Education and other public figures, reports of commissions and newspaper articles. In fact the whole book reads like a series of newspaper articles strung together.

The period under study was one of some innovation, as the government attempted to rationalize facilities and extend educational opportunity. Randles is prepared to concede that some reform was necessary — admitting, for instance, that the secondary schools were elitist. But for this she tries to blame the old scapegoat, English rule — even after forty years of independence.<sup>46</sup> Her enthusiasm for modernization is extremely limited and much of what happened is depicted as an unwarranted "intrusion" by the state in the private secondary sector.<sup>47</sup> Her references to the "sinister intention"<sup>48</sup> and "intemperate zeal"<sup>49</sup> of Department of Education officials are akin to Corcoran's conspiratorial theories.<sup>50</sup> The idea of a conspiracy against the Catholic Church in a government led by either Sean Lemass or Jack Lynch is difficult to take seriously. Like Corcoran's writings, it reads like propaganda for a cause — the cause of Church controlled schools. However, it is not completely worthless. It is a useful reference guide to some of the educational events of the 1960s and may be of value as a sourcebook for future historians.

The most important break with the old historiographical tradition came not from Irish university departments of education or from an 'educational historian' as such, but from a historian trained in the methodology of North American graduate schools. D.H. Akenson's *The Irish Educational Experiment: The National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century* (1970),<sup>51</sup> is the work which created this revolutionary break. It is in fact based on his Ph.D. at Harvard University.

Using sources that are both diverse and comprehensive, Akenson avoids the pitfall of merely chronicling educational legislation. Instead, his work is based on three major themes or questions which he carefully explores:

1. Why was a state-sponsored system of primary schools established in

economically and socially backward Ireland almost forty years before a similar system appeared in England?

2. Why was the system, originally non-denominational, transformed into a de facto denominational one within twenty years of its founding?
3. Why did effective control of the system pass from the commissioners to the treasury and to the Catholic bishops in the second half of the nineteenth century?

In examining these themes Akenson concentrates on the commissioners, the treasury, the Irish administration, the churches and their mutual struggles to shape and control education. It means that much attention is given to administrative detail, legal positions, and bureaucratic structures and procedures. The barrage of minutiae can be overwhelming at times but is obviously necessary in order to make some sense of the major questions initially posed. And Akenson is always convincing. There is an awareness throughout that educational developments do not take place in a vacuum. His references to important political, social, economic and ideological considerations bring a depth to his analysis hitherto unknown in Irish educational history writing.

For instance, in examining the origins of the National school system, Akenson draws attention to the nature of Irish government and the tradition of legislative interference in everyday life.<sup>52</sup> He considers, of course, many other factors, including the emergence of consensus among the various power groups in Ireland as to both the desirability and possible structure of a state system of education.<sup>53</sup> It is this multivariate approach which most distinguishes his work from the simplistic pronouncements found elsewhere. In examining the other issues the same comprehensiveness is displayed. There is a detailed analysis of the responses of all three major denominations to the idea of 'mixed' education, their agitation for special concessions, the gradual capitulation of the National Board to these demands, and the growing influence of the Catholic Church in the system under the leadership of Cardinal Cullen. It is a far cry from the story Auchmuty had to tell.

Akenson makes even further contributions to the revision of history. He effectively shows to be false the notion popularized by nationalist apologists that the National school system was an English conspiracy to destroy Irish nationality and the Irish language.<sup>54</sup> The curriculum of the schools, and the textbooks in particular had been condemned for their omission of any reference to Irish history or to Ireland in general. While admitting that this was a weakness, Akenson points out that the texts were carefully designed not to offend the sensibilities of any grouping in Ireland, regardless of ethnic or religious background. While this task was impossible in the absolute sense, the deliberate avoidance of controversial topics was essential if any degree of success was to be achieved.<sup>55</sup>

Akenson also rejects the theory of a conspiracy against the Irish language. He gives statistics which suggest that Irish had probably ceased to be the working language of the majority of the population by 1831 and shows that the commissioners were largely unaware that Irish could have any significance. He postulates that the switch to English by the peasantry was effected because of its obvious economic advantages and because of clerical insistence on its use.<sup>56</sup>

And what was the main accomplishment of the National schools? According to Akenson it was the virtual elimination of illiteracy during the course of the nineteenth century — an achievement which only the most die-hard nationalist would

reject as worthless.

Akenson did not go beyond 1900 in his examination of the National school system. He concluded on a critical note that suggested to some that perhaps an appraisal of Irish education in the twentieth century might be among his future plans. We are indeed fortunate that such was the case. His *Education and Enmity: The Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland, 1922-1950* appeared in 1973<sup>57</sup> but as it deals with Northern Ireland, it remains somewhat outside the scope of this paper. More relevant to our purposes is *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face: Education in Independent Ireland 1922-1960* which came out in 1975.<sup>58</sup>

In this work, Akenson has adopted by far the most interesting approach to Irish educational history to date. In the strict traditional sense it is not educational history at all, but rather socio-cultural history using the educational system as an indicator of the dominant values and attitudes of Irish society. As he says in his preface: "The way a society teaches children to face the pressures of the world tells us as much about that people as do all their statutes and parliamentary debates".<sup>59</sup> Employing sources as diverse as literature and government reports he structures his task around the following interrelated issues: the nature of the Irish revolution, authoritarianism and toleration in Ireland, and the place of children in Irish society. It is the latter issue which predominates throughout making it almost a study within the growing specialization known as 'History of Childhood'.

Akenson contends that Irish independence merely brought about a "change in Management"<sup>60</sup> and that little effort was made to disturb the basic structure of society or that of the school system which remained firmly under the control of the Catholic clergy. The revolution was socially conservative and the regime it gave rise to was more opposed to change than that which had preceded it. Innovation and investment in education was thus effectively stymied. Appalling conditions in many schools, in particular at the primary level, was the result. In comparing educational expenditure in Ireland with that in other countries, Akenson shows that the Irish have traditionally placed a low priority on the educational welfare of their children. This is supported by anthropological evidence suggesting the low status of children in the Irish family.<sup>61</sup>

Further evidence of this indifference to children is offered in the analysis of the Irish language revival. It was imposed on the school-going population in total disregard of contemporary educational psychology and without consulting parents. The revival policy is also given as an example of authoritarianism and intolerance of minorities by the state.

The conservatism of Irish society is again shown by Akenson in his examination of secondary education. The curriculum for many years reflected the country's "rejection of the twentieth century's dominant intellectual trends"<sup>62</sup> and the fee structure and private ownership of schools helped perpetuate rather than break down class distinctions.<sup>63</sup> Akenson even grapples with the subject of sexual repression and the schools' role in the process and offers a provocative hypothesis relating this repression to the high incidence of mental disorders in Ireland.

Akenson's picture of Irish schooling and society is not a very flattering one. Conservatism, puritanism, xenophobia, authoritarianism and a lack of concern for children are but some of the images he brings forcibly to attention. It is a book which helps shatter many myths and hence plays an important role in the constant revision of history.

D.H. Akenson's work has been significant in undermining many popularly held

notions about Irish education. His study of the National school system showed effectively that there was no deliberate conspiracy against Irish nationality and language, an argument often used by those who would 'undo the conquest' by creating a Gaelic-speaking country. His more recent publication has discredited the contention that the Irish school system most closely resembles the ideal by showing it to be elitist, repressive and neglectful of the basic needs of its charges.

But Akenson's contribution goes further. In his approach to the writing of history, and in particular in *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face*, he subscribes to Bernard Bailyn's conception of education "in its elaborate, intricate involvements with the rest of society."<sup>65</sup> School systems are not treated as independent entities with little or no relation to their social, cultural and political milieux. They are seen both as products of developments in the larger society and as contributors to future developments. It could be argued that in this methodological innovation Akenson has done for Irish educational historiography what Bailyn did for its American counterpart.

But perhaps it is too early to determine if indeed such a revolution has taken place. Research in Irish education has certainly picked up in recent years but the pace of publication is still too slow to permit any evaluation of the influence of Akenson's approach on other writers in the field. That Akenson has indicated a new direction is undoubtedly true; whether others will follow, and in what numbers, remains to be seen.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Tribute to Father T. Corcoran, *Studies*, June, 1943.

<sup>2</sup> A good example of this is Corcoran's "Enforcing the Penal Code on Education", *Irish Monthly*, March, 1931.

<sup>3</sup> Dermot Gleeson's tribute to T. Corcoran - "The Tipperaryman", *Studies*, June, 1943, p.156.

<sup>4</sup> See the comments of D.H. Akenson in his review of P.J. Dowling's *The Hedge Schools of Ireland*, *Irish Historical Studies*, September 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Dermot Gleeson, op. cit., p.154.

<sup>6</sup> T. Corcoran, "Making an Education Act, College Green, Dublin, 1782", *Irish Monthly*, June, 1931.

<sup>7</sup> T. Corcoran, "Education in the Dublin Acts of 1792-93", *Irish Monthly*, September, 1931, p.545.

<sup>8</sup> T. Corcoran, "The Civil Law and Irish Education, A.D. 1795-1799," *Irish Monthly*, October, 1931.

<sup>9</sup> Akenson's analysis of Corcoran's methods in *Irish Historical Studies*, September, 1968 is enlightening.

<sup>10</sup> Some examples of these sources are: R. Twiss, *A Tour in Ireland in 1775*, London, 1776; C.T. Bowden, *Tour Through Ireland*, Dublin, 1791; W. Reed, *Rambles Through Ireland*, 1815.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, "The Quality of Our Schools, 1823-1830", *Irish Monthly*, May, 1932.

<sup>12</sup> Corcoran must have been familiar with Wm. Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, 1844

<sup>13</sup> T. Corcoran, "Popular Education in the Ireland of 1825," *Studies*, March, 1925; "Education Policy After the Union," *Irish Monthly*, November, 1931.

<sup>14</sup> D.H. Akenson in *Irish Historical Studies*, September, 1968.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Brennan, *Schools of Kildare and Leighlin, A.D. 1775-1835*. Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1935.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.125.

<sup>17</sup> T. Corcoran's preface to P.J. Dowling's *The Hedge Schools of Ireland*. Dublin: Talbot Press, 1935.

<sup>18</sup> P.J. Dowling, *The Hedge Schools of Ireland*, p.69.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50-51.

<sup>21</sup> J.J. Auchmuty, *Irish Education, A Historical Survey*. Dublin: Hodges Figgis and Co., 1937.

- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.
- <sup>25</sup> D.H. Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment: The National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970, p.110.
- <sup>26</sup> Auchmuty, op. cit., p.145.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.
- <sup>28</sup> Some examples here might be: P. Birch, *St. Kieran's College, Kilkenny*. Dublin: Gill & Son, 1951; T.J. Walsh, *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters*. Dublin, 1959.
- <sup>29</sup> Released by the Mercier Press, Cork.
- <sup>30</sup> T.J. McElligott, *Education in Ireland*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1966.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.
- <sup>34</sup> Norman Atkinson, *Irish Education: A History of Educational Institutions*. Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1969.
- <sup>35</sup> Norman Atkinson, *Irish Education: A History of Irish Education: A Study in Conflicting Loyalties*. Cork: Mercier, 1971.
- <sup>36</sup> Atkinson, op cit. 51-58.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.91
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.98.
- <sup>40</sup> Dowling, *History*, p.80.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116.
- <sup>42</sup> Atkinson, op. cit., p.114.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.199-207.
- <sup>44</sup> E. Randles, *Post-Primary Education in Ireland, 1957-1970*. Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1975.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.293.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.293.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.323.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.303 is particularly illustrative.
- <sup>51</sup> Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment: The National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.
- <sup>54</sup> Corcoran was the main offender here but also influential was P.H. Pearse in his pamphlet *The Murder Machine*. Dublin: Whelan and Son, 1916.
- <sup>55</sup> Akenson, *Education Experiment*, pp.238-39.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.380.
- <sup>57</sup> Donald H. Akenson, *Education and Enmity: The Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland, 1922-1950*. Newton Abbot: published for the Institute of Irish Studies, the Queen's University of Belfast, by David and Charles Ltd, 1973.
- <sup>58</sup> Donald H. Akenson, *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face: Education in Independent Ireland, 1922-1960*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface, x.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.80.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p.142.

<sup>65</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1960.

*Résumé*

Avant d'attirer l'attention de Mr. D.H. Akenson (professeur d'Histoire à l'Université Queen's, à Kingston, depuis 1974), l'histoire de l'Education en Irlande était moribonde, faite par des amateurs, limitée et partisane. Notre article passe en revue ce qui a été écrit dans ce domaine et souligne l'importance de la contribution de Mr. Akenson.