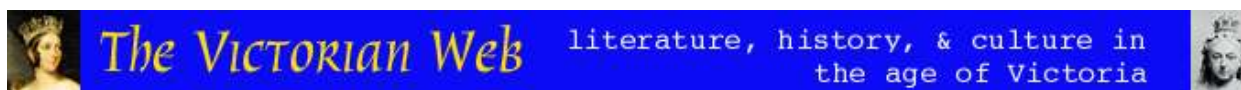


State Involvement in Public Education before the 1870 Education Act

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here is a tendency to believe that education came to England with the 1870 Education Act. In fact, the state had been involved since at least the 1830s and the debate over education for the the poor had been going for many many years prior to that. In Scotland every parish had had a school since the seventeenth century, and as early as 1807 a bill was introduced in England's Parliament which would have replicated that system. The bill was passed in the Commons but defeated in the House of Lords where it was argued that the interests of the [Established Church](#) were not protected.

Less than a decade later, a parliamentary committee to inquire into education in London for the "lower orders" was established at the instigation of Lord Brougham. Despite his encouragement of education (which would have been controlled by the [Church of England](#) but limited in religious teaching to the bible and a non-denominational catechism) no progress of note was made until 1833 when parliament made its first limited grant to education. The grant itself was small and went to religious bodies which used it to build schools. Its significance was that it was the first acceptance by the government of any financial responsibility for the education of the poor.

It is difficult to know what percentage of the labouring classes' children attended school. Estimates suggest that it ranged from about one-third to one-half in the first few years of [Victoria's](#) reign. The most common schools were Sunday Schools where children could go if they were not working and could learn to "read" the bible. What schooling there was was sporadic and its primary function was to fit people for their place in the social order. To say that schools in the early Victorian years were simply instruments of social control is simplistic, but that they filled this role more clearly than others is unquestionable. Even a cursory glance at the reports of the Central Society of Education (1837-39) bring this into clear focus.

Of greater interest to Victorianists would be the many and varied philanthropic movements concerned with education. Among the most important were the National and the British and Foreign Schools Societies. These were founded on the Monitorial Principles of Joseph Lancaster and Andrew Bell and were proclaimed the STEAM ENGINE OF THE MORAL WORLD. In fact, by using older children to teach the younger, and by carrying on education in one large room, it was possible to justify fewer teachers and lower building costs. In the words of G D H Cole and Raymond Postgate (*The Common People*, 308), "It is a notable example of the gullibility of the historian that this probably retrograde step is still frequently referred to as an advance."

The years of Victoria's reign were years of educational ferment. In perspective, however, it should be noted that it was not until 1899 and the establishment of the National Board of Education that free public education was available to all children in England. And it was not until 1902, after Victoria's death, that public secondary education was available. In that same year, the school boards were abolished and the responsibility for education was placed in the hands of local government. But that's another story, and one that falls outside our time frame.



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