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THE BELMORE COMMISSION AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION, 1898.

Aine Hyland

During the second half of the nineteenth century, technical instruction became part of the educational system of many European countries. In Ireland in the 1880s and 1890s there was growing pressure on the government to make provision for such instruction. Sir Horace Plunkett was among the most vocal and effective proponents of this cause and it was largely as a result of his work that the Agriculture and Technical Instruction (Ireland) Act was passed in 1899.1 Under the terms of this act, a new department - the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction - was set up with responsibility, **inter alia**, for technical instruction in Ireland. The new department funded technical instruction committees in county and county borough areas throughout the country and these committees set up and administered technical schools where young people were prepared for agriculture and trades.

During the same period, pressure was also mounting for a revision of the national school programme to include some element of manual and practical instruction. The momentum in favour of introducing a practical element into the curriculum of primary schools both at home and abroad had grown during the final two decades of the nineteenth century. With growing industrialisation in England and other Eruopean countries, the industrial and economic argument in favour of introducing manual instruction in primary schools was voiced in Denmark, Germany and France. At about the same time, a different argument in favour of the same end was being discussed in Western Europe and the United States. This argument was based on physiological and psychological rather than on industrial and economic grounds. It was maintained that manual instruction ought to have an important place in the curriculum as a corrective to book studies, on the grounds that book learning alone tended to be one-sided development of the child. This view had earlier been expressed by Comenius, Locke and Rousseau. Others went farther than this and contended that not only was manual training a necessary element of education, but

that it should be an integral part of the education of primary school children. Both Froebel and Herbart had insisted on the necessary connection between handwork and other lessons in the school. Manual training had been introduced in schools in the United States, France, Germany and in the Scandinavian countries. In Sweeden, a very successful programme in Educational Handwork (or Sloyd as it was called there) had been introduced as an optional subject in the primary school curriculum and was in operation in almost 2,000 schools by the mid 1890's.2

The idea of introducing children at primary school level to practical education was not a new one in Ireland. As far back as 1837, the commissioners of national education had announced that their Training College for teachers would contain a department for scientific instruction, the object of of which would be "not to teach trades, but to facilitate a perfect learning of them, by explaining the principles upon which they depend and habituating young persons to expertness in the use of their hands."3 In 1886, Right Rev. W. Walsh, D.D., Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, who in 1895 became a member of the Board of National Education in Ireland had stated that:

> **This system of national education is wanting in two requirements essential to every system of national education. One of these is, of course, the freedom of religious training. The other is the training, not of the intellectual faculties, but of the eyes, the hands, the fingers; such training as will serve to prepare the school boy for that which is to be his work in life.4**

Some years later (in 1894), Arnold Graves, who had been Secretary to the Commissioners of Education (Endowed Schools) for seven years and who was involved with Horace Plunkett in the movement to introduce technical instruction to Ireland, presented a memorandum to the National Board on behalf of the Technical Education Association for Ireland, urging the board to include practical subjects on the national school programme. He argued that such subjects would complement purely literary work and stated that:

> **The importance of manual instruction, from an educational standpoint, is very great. It teaches us to express our ideas in the concrete; develops the constructive faculty so much neglected in modern education; enables the development of the physical as well as of the mental powers; and while it is a**

pleasing alteration to purely literary work, it creates habits of order and industry and encourages a respect for honest work.5

The curriculum in Irish national schools from 1872 to 1900 was narrow and rigid and emphasised the three R's. The small government salary paid to national teachers was supplemented by a system of payment by results, whereby fees were paid to teachers on the basis of the results of their pupils at an annual examination carried out by the inspectors. The obligatory subjects of the examinatin programme were reading, writing, arithmetic and spelling for all grades; grammar and geography for pupils in fourth grade and above; needlework for girls and agriculture for boys in rural schools taught by a master. Besides these obligatory subjects, a large number of optional subjects could be taught, mostly outside school hours. Results fees were also payable for these extra subjects.6

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a widespread feeling that the results system was no longer a suitable basis for primary education. This system had been discontinued in England and Scotland in the 1890s. In Ireland, the results system had been criticised by teachers, inspectors and others interested in education.7

In 1896 the National Board responded to the calls for curricular reform. In March of that year, shortly after his appointment to the Board, Archbishop Walsh proposed that steps be taken to revise the national school curriculum. In July, the Board sent a memorandum to the lord lieutenant asking him to set up a commission of inquiry into the system of national education. The following month, a deputation from the Board met the lord lieutenant and presented the case in favour of revising the national school programme. Dr. Walsh argued in favour of introducing manual instruction into national schools and made the point that the aim was not to teach particular arts or trades, but to give a training

which should cultivate observation, accuracy and neatness, the love of honest, well-finished work, in fact, to develop those faculties and habits which are essential to good work in life.....8

The deputation to the lord lieutenant resulted in the setting

up in January 1897 of a commission, under the chairmanship of Lord Belmore

> **to inquire and report with a view to determining how far, and in what form, manual and practical instruction should be included in the educational system of primary schools under the board of national education in Ireland.9**

There were 14 members of this commission, 10 of whom were members of the National Board. Among these ten were Dr. Walsh and Professor Fitzgerald of Trinity College, who appear to have been the most influential members of the commission.**10** The four who were not members of the National Board were Lord Belmore himself; Monsignor Molloy (who was also a member of the Intermediate Board); Capt. T.B. Shaw who was an inspector in the Science and Art Department in England and J. Struthers who was an inspector under the Scottish Education Department.

In February 1897, only a month after its appointment, the commission published its first report. This report and the second report published in July, contained transcripts of evidence from educationalists in Ireland, England and Scotland. The third report, also published in July, included a special report on a visit to Sweden by three of the commissioners where they had visited a training school for educational handwork (Sloyd). The final report of the commission was published in June 1898. This report was signed by 12 of the original members of the commission. The two who did not sign were the chairman of the commission, Lord Belmore, who was ill and Lord Plunkett who had died in 1897. The first signatory to the document was Dr. Walsh who had played a significant role in the questioning of witnesses and in the collection of evidence. There is no doubt that he also played an important part in the writing of the report and the framing of the recommendations.

The Belmore commission was unambiguous in its conclusion. It recommended the introduction, not only of Hardwork but also of Drawing, Elementary Science, Singing and Drill into the curriculum of national schools. In the final report it was stated:

> **We may at once express our strong conviction that Manual and Practical Instruction ought to be introduced, as far as possible, into all schools where it does not at present exist, and that, in those schools where it does exist, it ought to be**

largely developed and extended. We are satisfied that such a change will not involve any detriment to the literary education of the pupils, while it will contribute largely to develop their faculties, to quicken their intelligence, and to fit them better for their work in life.11

The report went on to indicate the considerations which had led to this conclusion. Reference was made firstly to educational principles. The commission felt that:

The present system, which consists largely in the study of books, is one-sided in character. We think it important that children should be taught not merely to take in knowledge books, but to observe with intelligence the material world around them; that they should be trained in habits of correct reasoning on the facts observed; and that they should, even in schools, acquire some skills in the use of hand and eye to executive the conceptions of the brain.12

Throughout the report, the commission emphasised the educational aspects of manual training and de-emphasised the training aspects. In this regard reference was made to the failure of the Schools of Industry in the 18th century in Germany. These schools, which were primary schools, had attempted to give a form of technical instruction adapted to the requirements of particular trades. The Belmore commission emphasised that such training was "quite out of place in a primary school, where such specialised instruction was given prematurely and to the disadvantage both of primary education and of technical secondary education."**13** The commission also referred to the failure of a two-year course called "Handicraft" which had been introduced as an extra subject into the National School programme in Ireland in 1885.

"This course comprises instruction in a number of the ordinary operations of carpentry with the addition of miscellaneous other matters such as the soldering of pieces of tin, the hacking out of broken panes of glass. It does not appear to have been constructed with any very definite educational aim, and it seems to have been a failure from the beginning."14

The commission was insistent that a clear distinction should be made between courses which had a utilitarian purpose and the type of course which they recommended, whose purpose would be educational:

"It is of the utmost importance that the teachers should be fully informed of the essential distinction between a course... which is purely utilitarian in its aims, and a course of school Woodwork, constructed on sound educational lines, and made part of the work of the school in view solely of its general educational advantages."15

Attention was drawn to the beneficial effects of practical subjects in the general education of children when the educational aspects of these subjects were emphasised. The experience of England, Scotland and European countries in which practical education had been introduced and tested in the second half of the nineteenth century was referred to. In those countries, where the educational aspect of practical subjects had been emphasised, the effect on the children had been very positive:

The evidence we have received on this point is absolutely unanimous and, as we think, entirely conclusive. We have been told, over and over again, that the introduction of manual and practical training has contributed greatly to stimulate the intelligence of the pupils, to increase their interest in schoolwork, and to make school life generally brighter and more pleasant. As a consequence, the school attendance is improved; the children remain at school to a more advanced age; and much time is gained for the purpose of education.16

The commission referred in a subsidiary way to the relationship between manual and practical instruction in primary schools and the development of an effective system of Technical Education. In this regard it was pointed out that:

A strong desire exists throughout this country, and it is growing stronger every day, for the introduction of a general system of Technical Education. It is thought that a good system of Technical Education would contribute largely towards the development of arts and industries in Ireland; and in this opinion we entirely concur. But the present system of primary education is so one-sided in its character that it leaves the pupils quite unprepared for Technical Education. The clever boys trained in the National Schools, if they are disposed to seek for a higher education, may pass with advantage into Intermediate Schools of the kind now

general in Ireland: but they are not fit to enter a Technical Schol, even if they had such a school at their doors. Now it seems to us that the changes we recommend would go far to remedy this defect. The system of National Education, modified as we propose, would give an all-round training to the faculties of the children, and would thus lay a solid foundation for any..... afterwards be found suitable to their talents and their circumstances.17

The report emphasised that it was important that teachers understand the educational value of manual and practical subjects. It was pointed out that those countries in which the movement had been most successful were those which had "a number of earnest workers, profoundly impressed with a sense of the high educational value of a well-organised system of manual training in a primary school." The commission went on to state:

"We are impressed with the danger likely to result from such a branch of school-work as this being taken up by incompetent teachers, especially by teachers who do not appreciate, or even comprehend, its educational aims."18

The Commission went as far as to say that teachers who did not believe in the value of manual instruction in schools should not be permitted to teach it:

"We fully concur in the view.... that no one ought to be allowed to teach this or any other subject who does not believe in the value of the subject which he is to teach."19

Even before the final report of the commission was published, it had influenced the educational policies of the National Board. In September 1898, "kindergarten occupations" became compulsory for pupils in organized infants' schools or infants' departments. At the same time, the programme of the training colleges was amended; kindergarten was introduced as a compulsory subject for women and a course of manual training was included as an optional extra for men.**20**

In 1898, a sub-committee of the Board was set up to consider how the recommendations of the Belmore Commission might be more fully implemented in national schools.**21** This committee reported to the Board in November 1898 and again in February 1899. However, the unexpected death of the Resident Commissioner, T. Redington, in early February called a temporary halt to the activities of the sub-committee.

Before the end of February, a new Resident Commissioner was appointed. He was W.J.M. Starkie, a Greek scholar, who had lectured in Trinity College, Dublin for a number of years before his appointment in September 1898 as President of Queen's College, Galway. He had no experience of national education; he knew little or nothing about manual and practical instruction. He admitted that he had never even heard of the Belmore Commission:

> **I had never heard of the Manual Instruction Commission..... I had been living in Trinity College and it is quite possible in that quiet atmosphere not to know what is going on in the world.22**

Within weeks of his appointment, Starkie started to work on the development of a new programme for national schools. He was assisted in this work by Professor Fitzgerald, who had been an active member of the Belmore Commission. In July 1899, less than six months after his appointment, Starkie submitted a report to the National Board on the question of "introducing Manual and Practical Instruction in National Schools generally."**23** In this report, the different problems which would arise in the introduction of new subjects was discussed. It was recognised that it would be unwise to attempt to introduce the new subjects on a compulsory or nationwide basis. The intention at this stage was to provide instruction in only a comparatively small number of centres, because "for the first year or so it will be necessary to proceed tentatively". In this regard, reference was made to the experience in France where a rigidly formulated system of Manual Instruction had been introduced into primary schools some years earlier. This innovation had failed and the report saw it as an example of "the unwisdom of trying to impose any uniform scheme upon all the National schools of the country." The Board agreed to proceed on the basis of Starkie's report. The sanction of the government and of the Teasury was sought and obtained for the scheme outlined and Starkie was asked to produce detailed plans for its implementation.**24**

However, during the subsequent months, events took an unexpected turn. Instead of confining himself to developing the outline plan agreed by the National Board in July, Starkie went much further and in November 1899 produced significantly expanded proposals which referred, not only to the school programme, but to the system of payment and promotion of

teachers, to the method and organisation of inspection and to the system of administration in the central office in Marlborough St. Instead of merely adding some practical subjects to the existing national school programme, a radical revision of the entire programme was proposed. Payment by results would be abolished and the results programme would be replaced by a revised programme of instruction.25

The Revised Programme (as it was called) was based on the premise that there were three matters that should always be provided for in a primary school. First, and most essential, every child should be equipped for the work of life by giving him a knowledge of Reading, Writing and Artthmetic. Second, the senses and the intelligence should be cultivated by Hand, Eye and Ear Training, Elementary Science, Object Lessons etc. Third, a sound mind and a healthyh body should be preserved by physical drill and exercise.26 Starkie believed that the programme should be flexible and that within certain limits, managers and teachers should be allowed to adapt the programme to the needs of the locality and the capacity of the pupils. He also believed that the teacher should be "absolutely unfettered" in the choice of methods of instruction.

> **Freedom and elasticity are vital to good teaching and it is worth while sacrificing a great deal of the accuracy exacted by an examination test in exchange for the alertness of intellect, the spirit of initiative and independence, the slow but continuous development which a less rigid training fosters.... It will be our aim to make provision for the introduction in some measure of Manual Training into all Irish schools and we entertain a sanguine hope that at no distant epoch the new and less bookish methods of instruction will remove the existing obstacles to the spread of industrial enterprise....27**

The Revised Programme not only incorporated all of the practical subjects recommended by the Belmore Commission, it also introduced changes which had not been suggested by the Commission. The syllabuses of the traditional subjects, such as Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and Geography were revised and the emphasis was changed from the accumulation of quantity of knowledge to the comprehension of the underlyhing concepts. The Revised Programme encouraged learning based on observation, activity and experience.

The difference between the new and the old programmes was described by a senior inspector as follows:

> **Under the Results system, the children were driven, not led. It was all hard work, forced upon them by their teachers and the course pursued in the schools appeared to be based on the ground principle that you can be educated whether you please or do not please..... The teacher really taught the children what to think and say, and not how to think and find suitable expression for the thought..... Under the new code, the teacher adopting the so-called heuristic method - a very old method revived under a new name - endeavours first of all to awaken and excite the interest of his pupils; but he does not proceed, as under the Results system, to allay and satisfy the interest thus aroused, but he rather supplies them with the means of doing so for themselves. The children thus have to begin to think and reason, and thus really educate themselves, the teacher contributing as his share forms, time and guidance.28**

Conceptually, the Revised programme was impressive. It was based on sound educational and philosophic principles. It was coherent in its planning and presentation. But from the start, it encountered difficulties in regard to implementation. Lack of resources, financial and material, contributed to the difficulties but there were other factors which militated against its success. Starkie was accused of failing to consult inspectors and teachers who alleged that the expectations of the Revised programme were unrealistic. The I.N.T.O. had from the start expressed its opposition to some aspects of the programme. They were opposed to "the provisional and tentative" nature of the programme as initially promulgated.

> **We must candidly say that we have little faith in a universally tentative and provisional programme. We consider it would much better to perfect it in as far as the experience of managers, teachers and inspectors could make it perfect.29**

Many teachers failed to understand the underlying principles of the programme. Practical subjects such as Handwork suffered particularly. By 1904 the Board admitted that most of the teachers "failed to gain any connected grasp or knowledge of the subject."30 A senior inspector reported that:

had its spirit and aim been fully realised by the teachers it would have helped in a material way to forward the progress of the schools..... [but] the instruction rarely rose above a mechanical routine that was wearisome and uninspiring to the last degree.31

Many teachers, as well as some managers and parents, did not understand the educational significance of manual instruction and felt that it was irrevelant in Irish schools. T.J. O'Connell, one-time General Secretary of the I.N.T.O. referring to this in his book, **100 Years of Progress**, stated:

Generally speaking, managers, teachers, some inspectors and at least one Commissioner, the Protestant Bishop of Killaloe, did not consider the time spent on this form of training as worthwhile. It had been tried in London and abandoned as a costly failure. It was suitable perhaps in industrial centres where openings might be available in the future for boys and girls now in school. But in Ireland, such openings were few and far between and the book learning and the three R's fitted them better for the jobs in the local shops or the post-offices which they might chance eventually to secure, or in Britain or the U.S. which would be the likely destination of so many of them.32

And so it was not surprising to find that in 1905, when the national school programme was modified in the light of the experience of the previous five years, Handwork was dropped as an obligatory subject. It was ironic that one of the main reasons for its failrue was its identification with technical education. Teachers were adamant that technical training had no place in the national school. Insofar as primary education had a utilitarian purpose, it was, as T.J. O'Connell had pointed out, to help its better pupils to obtain white collar jobs, either in the urban areas of Ireland or in Britain or the U.S.A. The educational purposes of manual instruction were not understood nor achieved, in spite of the emphasis which had been placed on this aspect in the report of the Belmore Commission.