



## 'After the manner of the Irish schools': the influence of Irish national education in the British Empire



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### ABSTRACT

The establishment of the Commissioners of National Education in 1831 provided Ireland with a non-denominational education system that was aimed at uniting the population. The development and implementation of a state-controlled system of education represents a shift in policy away from a disciplinary mechanism used to proselytise Irish children to that of a governmental technology directed at influencing the conduct of the population. This paper looks at the ideology that influenced Irish national education, how that was representative of a wider imperial ideology, and how the Irish system itself influenced the spread of that ideology. It briefly examines the rationale, structure and operation of the national system, showing the attempt to refocus social relations through encouraging cooperation in the establishment and management of schools. In this way the influence of national education went beyond the classroom to wider society. The influence of Irish education reforms are then examined in respect to those in England and in the Anglophone colonies, notably in Canada and Australia. The direct influence of the Irish system across the British Empire, including the textbooks published in Ireland, represents the development of a wider rationale aimed at changing the conduct of colonists and creating imperial citizens. The Irish national system therefore went far beyond a model for the structure of an educational system, but also encouraged the spread of an imperial ideology that legitimised and secured the governance of colonial authorities across the British Empire.

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Ireland played a crucial role in the rise of Britain as a global power in the nineteenth century. While many studies have detailed the colonial technologies employed by the British administration in Ireland, these were not simply a one-way process.<sup>1</sup> The various developments in Ireland had a significant impact on the nature of the wider British Empire. The Acts of Union in 1800 resulted in Ireland being directly governed from the imperial centre. This produced a shift in the rationale of government in Ireland towards more liberal ideals that underpinned the approach in Britain. Institutions that sought to influence social conduct were key to this shift, and were gradually incorporated into the state structure in

Ireland throughout the 1830s and 1840s. This was often framed as a way to promote social change as part of a civilising mission which would improve the welfare of the population. It also aimed to legitimise the British administration as a key actor in Irish society. As a result, by the mid nineteenth century Ireland possessed a whole raft of centrally administered social institutions, which brought about a new institutional landscape and included the extensive building of new gaols, police stations, workhouses, hospitals, asylums and schools which were centralised and transformed such that they were directed towards the Irish social body.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the developments in Ireland were closely studied in other places where similar reforms were occurring. In this way, colonial technologies introduced in Ireland influenced the spread of similar developments across the Empire.

This paper examines reforms in one of these social institutions: education. Ireland was one of the first places in the Empire to experience substantial centralised educational reform with the

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<sup>1</sup> G. Prendiville, The social magic of correspondence: conceptions of the mails in early nineteenth century Ireland, *Journal of Historical Geography* 31 (2005) 459–477; D. Nally, 'That coming storm': the Irish poor law, colonial biopolitics, and the Great Famine, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98 (2008) 714–741; A. Crampsie, Creating citizens from colonial subjects: reforming local government in early twentieth century Ireland, *Historical Geography* 42 (2014) 208–228; J.P. McGauran, George Cornewall Lewis, Irish character and the Irish poor law debate, 1833–1836, *Journal of Historical Geography* 57 (2017) 28–39.

<sup>2</sup> M. Hennessy, Administration, in: H.B. Clarke and S. Gearty (Eds), *Maps and Texts: Exploring the Irish Historic Towns Atlas*, Dublin, 2013, 152–163.

establishment of national education in 1831. Irish educational developments, therefore, had a significant role to play across the Empire, particularly in the Anglophone colonies. Recent research on education in nineteenth-century Ireland can be divided into two loose themes: those that explore the imperial ideology and actions that shaped Irish domestic education, and those that examine the impact of Irish education within the English-speaking world.<sup>3</sup> This paper seeks to combine these themes by examining the ideology that influenced the development of Irish national education, how that was representative of a wider imperial ideology and how the Irish system itself influenced the spread of that ideology. As a result, this paper relates to a wider body of research that examines the interactions of power, social relations and institutions in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

The establishment of Irish national education in 1831 attempted to introduce a non-denominational centralised system in the hope of uniting children of all creeds in the same classroom in an effort to reduce sectarian tension. In doing so, the British administration took a more direct role in reforming the habits of the Irish population. The centralisation of education was the result of a long process of legitimisation by the state, both as an actor in the educational field and in regard to the rationale of its policy. The first attempt to centralise education in Ireland occurred with the proposals of Thomas Orde at the end of the eighteenth century. Orde investigated Irish education provision as chief secretary in 1785 and proposed reforms to the Irish parliament in 1787. His ambitious plan proposed a complete restructuring of education into a five-tier system. At the peak of this system was a new university that would have a college of visitors and inspectors to regulate, supervise and maintain standards throughout the whole system.<sup>5</sup> While this plan was never enacted, it was the first indication of a changing strategy regarding education in Ireland. Orde saw centrally administered education as a way to shift from the proselytising and subjugation of children towards the general improvement of knowledge and behaviour of the whole population. In turn, he stated that this would be 'the foundation for the superstructure of the state' and that improving this system would 'render that foundation not only more beautiful, but more secure and permanent'.<sup>6</sup> This change in strategy accelerated from the start of the nineteenth century following the Acts of Union and eventually resulted in the establishment of national education.

### Irish national education

A plethora of inquiries and committees in the early nineteenth century criticised the nature of Irish education, most notably those of 1809–1812, 1825 and 1828. These were part of the rapid increase, in Ireland and elsewhere, of large-scale parliamentary investigations of society. They were often published and disseminated widely, and had significant power to structure national debate.<sup>7</sup> The inquiries

mapped out and categorised the populations and social domains and, as such, established targets for state action. The reports concluded that suspicions held by various religious bodies towards the proselytising nature of education provision meant that no existing system could produce universal satisfaction in Ireland. The lack of engagement of the Catholic population due to this suspicion, and the failure to enforce the obligation on the Protestant clergy to fund parish schools which would include Catholic children, were outlined as the principal reasons for these failures. The issue of the religious background of those involved in schools therefore became central to the shift in education policy. The inquiries sought to frame education as a way to bring Protestant and Catholic children together, which would reshape social relations within the country.

The first attempt to do this was the provision from 1812 of parliamentary grants to an educational charity known as the Kildare Place Society.<sup>8</sup> The aim of the society was to introduce a system which would not interfere with religious doctrines. The progress of the society was evaluated in the later inquiries where it was concluded that the system 'failed in producing universal satisfaction' as the Catholic clergy distrusted what it perceived to be attempts to inculcate Protestant values.<sup>9</sup> The reports recommended the creation of a centralised system where all children could be taught in the same classroom, and 'where suspicion should, if possible, be banished, and the cause of distrust and jealousy be effectively removed'.<sup>10</sup> The transformation of education from a disciplinary mechanism used to convert the Irish from 'the errors of Popery' to a governmental technology directed at influencing the conduct of the whole population so that people would become 'useful citizens' was illustrated throughout the reports, along with the accompanying parliamentary debates.<sup>11</sup> This represents a change in parliamentary policy towards education in Ireland, as the reports map a shift from disciplinary power targeting the body (and mind) of the pupil to a mode of governmentality targeting the Irish population in general, instilling habits that 'are yet more valuable than mere learning'.<sup>12</sup> As the capacities of a child could be refined within a classroom, and the social norms that children should abide by outside the classroom could be elaborated, a centralised education system fostered self-formation through various practices that encouraged individuals to govern themselves. Education was thus incorporated into the shifting rationale of government away from the direct imposition of power over individuals towards the encouragement of social change in the wider population through more liberal means, in which centralised institutions played a key role.<sup>13</sup>

The various Church authorities heavily opposed the plans to establish a centralised education system in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Yet the parliamentary inquiries gradually mapped out the state's domain in the education field and put forward the claim that the state was acting in the common interests of the Irish population. This distinguished it from previous systems of domination in attempting to directly anglicise the population,

<sup>3</sup> D. Dickson, J. Pyz and C. Shepard, *Irish Classrooms and British Empire: Imperial Contexts in the Origins of Modern Education*, Dublin, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> M. Ogborn, Local power and state regulation in nineteenth century Britain, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 17 (1992) 215–226; M. Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, London, 2010; D. Nally, *Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine*, Notre Dame, 2011; J. Morrissey, Foucault and the colonial subject: emergent forms of colonial governmentality in early modern Ireland, in: P. Duffy and W. Nolan (Eds), *At the Anvil: Essays in Honour of William J. Smyth*, Dublin, 2012, 135–150.

<sup>5</sup> J. Kelly, The context and course of Thomas Orde's plan of education of 1787, *The Irish Journal of Education* 20 (1986) 3–26.

<sup>6</sup> T. Orde, *Mr Orde's Plan for an Improved System of Education in Ireland*, Dublin, 1787, 14.

<sup>7</sup> N. Ó Ciosáin, *Ireland in Official Print Culture, 1800–1850: A New Reading of the Poor Inquiry*, Oxford, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> The official name of the society was the Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor of Ireland, but was known as the Kildare Place Society due to the location of its headquarters in Dublin.

<sup>9</sup> *First Report of the Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry*, Parliamentary Papers [hereafter P.P.] 1825, 58.

<sup>10</sup> *First Report of the Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry*, P.P. 1825, 91.

<sup>11</sup> *Third Report of the Commissioners of the Board of Education, in Ireland: The Protestant Charter Schools*, P.P. 1809, 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Fourteenth Report of the Commissioners of the Board of Education, in Ireland*, P.P. 1812, 5.

<sup>13</sup> P.J. Joyce, *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*, London, 2002.

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