AUSTRALIAN BICENTENNIAL EXHIBITION

The Australian Bicentennial Exhibition at present travelling round Australia will be at Brandon Park, Wollongong, from Saturday 8th October to Tuesday, 11th October.

The Society hopes to have a tent display. We will need volunteers to man the display and sell publications between 9am and 8.30pm each day while the Exhibition is in Wollongong. Volunteers are asked to contact Mrs. McCarthy (29-8225). Even if you can only give us a short time, we will need all the help we can get.

NEW MEMBER

The Society welcomes Miss Annabel Lloyd as a new member. As those who attended the August meeting know, Miss Lloyd’s special qualifications will make her a particularly valuable member and we look forward to a long and happy association.

Religion and the three Rs: the Church-State Controversy in Wollongong’s Public Education Development 1836 -

Briefly the story of Wollongong’s first government school is this: it was built at the behest of Governor Bourke who had planned a program of what were called ‘Irish National Schools’, i.e. non-denominational ones, in an endeavour to provide elementary education for the large number of colonial children who were receiving no education at all. He had the British government’s support for the proposal and the Legislative Council of NSW endorsed it in 1836, allocating 3000 pounds for school building.

A public meeting in Wollongong welcomed the proposal, the motion being put by the Anglican chaplain, William Wilkinson. The school was almost ready for occupation by 1840 but it remained unused and neglected for a decade, not being officially opened until 1852.

The reason: opposition by the Church of England and Presbyterian clergy in Wollongong, though the Catholic priest had supported it. This opposition was just a reflection of a much wider campaign in Sydney. Governor Gipps, who succeeded Bourke, bowed before the pressure and the National School campaign was suspended until 1848. In the event, Wollongong’s school was the only example of its kind, memorable in its unique failure.

The story of this failure, both in the case of Wollongong and in the wider context of New South Wales, is bound up with the struggle, which had its origins in Britain, between church and state over the control of education. Since the leader of the opposition to Bourke’s school in Wollongong was the township’s first Anglican Rector, it is a pity that Dr. Stuart Piggin has glossed over the role of Matthew Devenish Meares. In the biographical address given at St. Michael’s Cathedral, Wollongong, and reprinted in the Illawarra Historical Society Bulletin 1 June 1988, Dr. Piggin mentions Meares’s concern for the convicts:
Meares had not neglected the convicts among his flock: he took services at the convict stockade in Wollongong every Sunday [Attendance was compulsory]. But he shared the view that New South Wales must put its convict past behind it and start building a new nation ... And children would be ill prepared for their role as future citizens if educated under Bourke’s permissive system.

This is the only reference to the controversy and to Bourke, who also had what Dr. Piggin might call ‘permissive’ ideas about the brutality of the convict system operating in New South Wales in the 1830s. Dr. Piggin continues:

As with many Protestant clergymen of the nineteenth century, Meares was a champion of progress and civilisation and he was excited by the commercial prosperity promised by the opening of the district’s first coal mine in 1849.

This paper is an attempt to show the wider historical significance of people and events in local history. The battle between Meares and Bourke (and Bourke’s successor, Governor Gipps) was not merely a matter of religious versus the new, conservative versus ‘progressive’. It was British political and social development as much as the particular circumstances of the Australian penal settlement that caused the turmoil in Wollongong in 1840.

Education in 18th century England was dominated by the Church of England. The Established Church controlled University, grammar school (secondary) and elementary education, the last being for the lower classes. This was limited to the three Rs, to which one must add a fourth, Religion. From the beginning of the 19th century the Church’s Societies for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts brought an expansion of charity schools for the poor; religion was given great emphasis; the teachers’ qualifications were confined to the ability to teach sufficient smattering of literacy to enable the reading and learning of the catechism.

The industrial revolution brought increasing numbers of the poor to the towns. The French Revolution and the wars that followed heightened English fears of crimes against property, even revolution. Education of the children of the poor was seen by many as the means of inculcating respect for property and authority, rather than as a way of providing opportunities for advancement. The Bishop of London expressed, in 1803, a positive fear of over-educating the poor:

... it is safest for both the Government and the religion of the country to let the lower classes remain in that state of ignorance in which nature has originally placed them.

Another member of the establishment, a Justice of the Peace, expressed much the same fear in 1807:

It is doubtless desirable that the poor should be generally instructed in Reading if it were only for the best of purposes - that they may read the Scriptures. As to WRITING and ARITHMETIC, it may be apprehended that such a degree of knowledge would produce in them a disrelish for the laborious occupations of life.
Despite such weighty objections the numbers of charity schools grew, especially when the dissenters were allowed to enter the field. To swell the numbers of those taught without having to provide more teachers an ingenious monitorial system was devised. While the Church of England insisted on the inclusion of its catechism as a necessary part of schooling, others began teaching the scriptures in a non-denominational way. Nevertheless the religious emphasis existed in all schools and a strong moral purpose persisted among educators of all denominations, and later in government schools, throughout the whole of the 19th century.

In Scotland where the majority of the population adhered to Presbyterianism, their church, the Church of Scotland, had insisted since the end of the 17th. century on a much better education system than prevailed in England. Every parish had to have a school and a school master, and regardless of class, every child had the right to attend.

The situation was worst in Ireland where severe restrictions against Catholics and a monopoly control of education by the Church of England meant there were few opportunities for the education of Catholic children of poor families. Catholic Emancipation was finally granted in 1829.

It was in Ireland, two years later, that a 'National' system was first introduced with the blessing of the British Government. This system promoted the teaching of the scriptures in a non-denominational way, thereby encouraging the attendance of Catholic children and non-Catholic alike.

The 1830s was a period that saw the beginning of government intervention in a number of areas as the industrial revolution gained momentum and the interests of the middle class had to be met. Education had to become more efficient and more widespread. The Church tried vigorously but unsuccessfully to retain its long-held control; the same church-state struggle for domination in the education area occurred in European countries with the onset of the industrial revolution. In Scotland also, where many Presbyterians favoured voluntarism, there was at first opposition to state aid.

In the Australian colony Governor Bourke was therefore the first governor to reflect the changed policies of the British Government in regard to education. That he had liberal views on other matters too was soon apparent. Where his predecessor had sent troops to the Bathurst district to subdue the Aborigines, Bourke encouraged missionaries to use gentler methods. He deplored the brutalities of the convict system and imposed a limit on the number of the convicts that could be employed by any land owner; he also reduced the amount of lashes a convict could receive for an offence. As an English gentleman and a member of the Church of England, he had lived in Ireland while the National system of education was being given its first trial and believed that it could also be successfully adopted in New South Wales.

Bourke's expectations were not unrealistically based. The Church of England's lone chaplain in the First Fleet was aided in his educational efforts from the government's funds; so too were any other individuals wanting to found schools. Literate convicts, such as forgers, were made available to officers or free settlers as tutors for their children. The governors themselves established schools for the children of convicts. When C. of E. schools were established they were automatically financed by the governor.
Representatives of the other churches arrived in the 1820s, Father Therry to minister to the Catholics in 1820, George Erskine, Methodist in 1822, J.D. Lang from the Church of Scotland in 1823 and in 1825 Thomas Scott came to the colony as its first Anglican archdeacon. Governor Brisbane had appointed the Anglican Thomas Reddall as the director-general of the government schools in New South Wales. But Scott demanded much more: a church and school corporation controlled by the Church of England, the supervision of all education with the right to inspect all schools, the ownership of one-seventh of all land in the colony. His claims were tentatively supported by the British Government but in 1830 the Archdeacon was informed that the corporation and reference for the Church of England would end in 1833.

Governor Bourke’s proposals for the development of National Schools were despatched for approval from England in September 1833. The endorsement came nearly three years later, in June 1836. In the meantime Bourke visited the Wollongong area, decided Wollongong should be proclaimed as a town, visited again in 1835 and by 1836 was convinced there was a need for a National School there.

In Wollongong by this time there were three denominations with full time clergy: the Church of England, the Catholic and the Presbyterian. The first resident chaplain had been William Wilkinson who came to Wollongong in 1833. He took over the school which had been founded in 1827 with 11 pupils and developed it as a denominational school, using it as well as a temporary church. Wilkinson had disagreements with Archdeacon Scott and more seriously, with the future Bishop Broughton. The Catholics had a chapel in Harbour Street from 1833 and their priest was Father John Rigney. The Presbyterians were visited by the vigorous J.D. Lang in 1836 (he rode his horse down Bulli Mountain and along the beach, returning the same way to join a coach in Appin). By 1837 they were able to build their first church in Wollongong. Their clergyman was the Rev. J. Tait.

The three denominations were represented at a public meeting in 1836 which enthusiastically received the proposal of the government school. The resolution of acceptance was moved by William Wilkinson “hailing it as a boon of the highest value”.

Ironically, Archdeacon Broughton had returned to Sydney on the same day as Governor Bourke received endorsement for his National School program. When he became the first Anglican bishop in the colony, Wilkinson did not send the customary congratulations. Ill feeling continuing, Wilkinson resigned from his Wollongong position and went to Balmain. His place was taken by the Rev. Matthew Meares, later to be the Rector of the first St. Michael’s Church. It was Meares who was to lead the campaign against the National School. Only Father Rigney was to maintain support.

The social composition of Wollongong at the time of the events, as shown in the 1841 census is significant:

There were only 841 people, 30 percent of whom were under the age of 21. 148 children were between the ages of 7 and 14. 295 were between 2 and 14. So there was a good supply of school material.
The religious persuasion of the population was:

- Anglican 483
- Catholic 243
- Presbyterian 73
- Wesleyan Methodist 27

There were 537 males, 294 females.

Of these 321 (216m., 15f.) were convicts working out their sentences, or were ticket-of-leave persons (the transport system having ended in 1840) or were ex-convicts. Father Rigney’s support being for the labourers in the community one could assume that many of these were Irish convicts or ex-convicts.

The opposition of the Rev. Mr. Meares was based on the conservative English belief that the Anglican dogma was an essential part of a school curriculum. He supported the stand taken by his Bishop who was determined to maintain his own denomination’s schools throughout New South Wales.

The Rev. Mr. Tait with a small congregation could well have been influenced by his Anglican colleague. And as his leader was the indomitable J.D. Lang, at this time a voluntarist, he followed his leader.

Faced with the opposition, inside and outside his Council, from the Anglican Bishop, the leader of the Church of Scotland and the big land-owners, Bourke withdrew his proposals. Instead he made available financial aid for the leading churches and their schools in a half-and-half arrangement, the government matching amounts raised by the churches. The Wollongong school, however, proceeded since it had been publicly endorsed and it was not until the building was almost completed that the Rev. Meares began the campaign against its opening. Governor Bourke’s term of office having come to an end it was his successor Governor Gipps who had to do battle with the Wollongong opposition.

He complained to the British Government in 1839 of “the wastefulness of government money spent on the denominational schools and the inefficiency of the education system in the thinly spread population”. He believed that “the needs of the population were not the consideration of the religious groups; rather they were concerned with their own aims and made exaggerated statements about the vice and immorality in the colony”.

In 1840 through the magistrate P. Plunkett, the heads of the three churches were asked to provide the numbers of children who might be expected to attend the school. Only Father Rigney supplied the information requested: 123. He stressed the pressing want of a public school which would meet the needs of the poor in Wollongong. He complained of the frequent dismissals, resignations and other changes amongst the masters of the existing schools. He stressed their appalling inefficiency which meant that never more than 60 children had attended. He attached a petition of 112 names, headed by the name of Plunkett the magistrate and including Alec Osborne and Ellen Lysaght. Added to his petition were the signatures of 50 “parents of the humbler classes” whose children would go to the school.
Before his petition was sent, he was approached by four people who had been persuaded by the Rev. Mr. Meares to ask to have their names removed. The number of children dropped from 123 to 110.

The Rev. Mr. Tait collected 36 names (including that of J. Shoobert, mine owner in 1849, later member of the Council) and he said:

Any attempt to unite R.C. and Protestant children in one common school by entirely shutting out religion from any part of its daily business, besides being wrong in principle will signally fail in practice, defeat the great object of many of its supporters and produce a degree of animosity among us that is at present unknown.

He spoke also of the large capacity of the C. of E’s school house. So there was no need for a new one.

Bishop Broughton added a letter of introduction to his chaplain’s memorial. He accused Father Rigney’s petition of being “surreptitiously circulated” and the signatories of being “ignorant of the issues involved”.

The Rev. Mr. Meares expressed the belief:

that the Irish National System would not instil the principles of religion into the minds of the young, that it would deny to the young the reading of the scriptures, or what is just the same, would not encourage it; it would forbid when to raise their voices in prayer.

R. Westmacott (soon to be bankrupt) signed, plus 56 others, including some who had signed Rigney’s petition.

It should be noted, as all who read Bourke’s proposals must have been aware, that he did intend to instil the principles of religion. They were integral to the Irish National System. Broughton and Meares however, chose to equate “the principles of religion” with the Anglican catechism.

Governor Gipps wrote sadly to Lord Russell in 1840. The C. of E. had started another school even while the National School was being built. Fifty pounds was raised from the C. of E. diocese. Local Anglicans donated 150 pounds so the government was asked to give 200 pounds. In a later report he wrote even more sadly:

The establishment of the Diocesan school was quickly followed by that of a Roman Catholic one and preparations are I believe being made for a Presbyterian one which will probably be followed by a Methodist one; and religious Animosities, formerly unknown in this place have lately manifested themselves to such a degree that I have preferred to leave the Government school empty rather than appointing a master to it of any denomination to give fresh cause for dissention.

The school stayed empty until it fell into disrepair. It had to be extensively renovated in 1850 for the sum of 50 pounds.

By that time there had been several developments in the church/state controversy. By 1843 Lang had changed his mind and moved in the Legislative Council for the Irish National System. He withdrew his motion following bitter opposition from Bishop Broughton and the Sydney Morning Herald. But in the following year a Select Committee proposed the introduction of the Nationa System and teacher-training. Despite controversy the measure
was adopted. Governor Gipps let the matter lie because of the financial difficulties of the depressed forties.

When Governor Fitzroy took office in 1846 he found the state of education so unsatisfactory with so many uneducated children being employed in rural areas that he embarked on a programme of government school building. He established two Boards, one for government schools and one for denominational. There were no objections when at last in 1852 the Wollongong school was declared open.

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