

Education in Limerick

1830 - '60

by Kevin

R. O'Connor

Usually one associates the period 1830—'60 with the years of Daniel O'Connell, or the great cholera epidemic which struck Limerick in 1832, or perhaps most of all one thinks of the Famine of 1845—'47. However, the period is also a most interesting one from the point of view of education in Limerick. Indeed, the transformation and development of education was nationwide. But in Limerick it saw the establishment of many of the city's most famous institutions, including the Model School (recently burnt down), the arrival of the Redemptorist Fathers, the Mercy nuns, the Good Shepherd nuns, the Presentation nuns and the setting up of the Limerick Diocesan Seminary.

The origins of this development can be traced back to the start of the 19th century. The Royal Commission of 1806 reported in 1812 with a general plan of education for the "lower classes". The exact reason for this move by the British government is not too clear but some would say it was due to the upsurge of nationalistic feeling in Europe at the time, and the belief that the government felt it could exercise more power or control over the people through a better organised education system. On the other hand, it may simply have felt duty bound to fulfil an obligation to educate the masses.

Previous to this report there had been three main types of school. First, there was the "pay school" where the pupils paid a certain sum to the teacher who gave them instruction. Schools like this varied very much in the type of premises in which they were held. There was no government control over the curriculum and parents of pupils often chose the school according to the curriculum offered. Most of the schools listed in the 1825 report on education in Limerick city were pay schools. In all there were 108 schools with 5,021 pupils attending. Many of the schools had as few as 2 pupils enrolled but others were quite large. Secondly, there was the estate type school which was run and sponsored by a landlord, usually for the benefit of his tenants' children. No such school was

reported in Limerick city at this period. Thirdly, there was the independent school.

The 1825 report states that in Limerick at this period there were 18 independent schools. These schools were free to pupils and were run or sponsored by individuals or societies but usually they belonged to a certain religious body or organisation. The schools tended to have much larger numbers than the pay schools and were much more important, as they were the basis for the future development of education in Limerick. The salaries of the teachers in these schools were paid by the sponsor or organisation.

From the table and graph given below we see that the independent schools were on average bigger than the pay schools. From the figures supplied we can see that there were 6 times as many pay schools (108) as independent schools (18) but the pay schools only had 2½ times (5021) as many pupils as the independent schools (1930). But more important still, we notice that before 1830 there were only 2 teaching orders in Limerick — the Christian Brothers, situated in Clare Street, and the Sisters of St. Clare. Later we shall see that this situation was to take a dramatic turnabout by 1860.

This table shows the number, site, attendance and sponsors of independent schools of Limerick city in 1825:

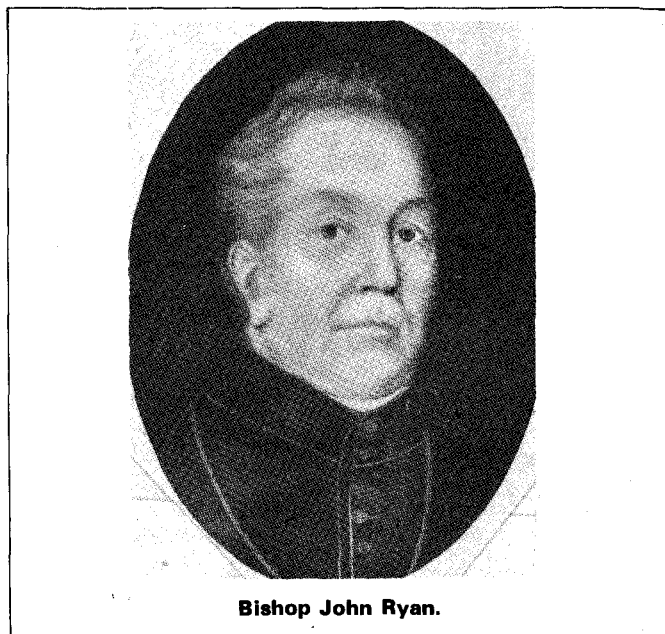
No. Parish	Street	Religion of Teachers	No. of Pupils	Societies or Sponsors
1. St. John's	St. John's Square	R.C.	88	London Hib. Soc.
2. St. John's	Clare Street	R.C.	486	& Kildare Place Soc.
3. St. Mary's	Bow Lane	C. of I.	5	C.B.S.
4. St. Mary's	Creagh Lane	C. of I.	12	Dean
5. St. Michael's	Mardyke	C. of I.	115	Irish Bap. Soc.
6. St. Michael's	George's Street	C. of I.	15	Kildare Pl. Soc.
7. St. Michael's	Denmark Street	R.C.	84	Ladies Soc.
8. St. Michael's	Sexton Street	R.C.	303	Patron (R.C.)
9. St. Michael's	Henry Street	R.C.	39	Local Subs.
10. St. Michael's	Henry Street	R.C.	36	Mendicity (F.).
11. St. Michael's	New Barracks	C. of I.	32	Mendicity (M)
12. St. Michael's	New Barracks	C. of I.	20	Military School 19th Reg
13. St. Munchin's	Barrack Street	R.C.	550	Military School 39th Reg
14. St. Nicholas	House of Ind. North Strand	C. of I.	71 (M)	Order of St. Clare
15. St. Nicholas	House of Ind. North Strand	C. of I.	72 (F)	Kildare Pl. Soc.
16. St. Nicholas	Alms House	C. of I.	20	Kildare Pl. Soc.
17. St. Nicholas	Nicholas Street	C. of I.	20	Patron
18. St. Patrick's	Park	R.C.	162	Patron
			1930	Patron (R.C.).

The government, however, was very slow to act on the report of 1812. First of all it tried a compromise scheme of subsidising the Kildare Place Society, whose schools were not subject to any direct denominational control. In Limerick at this period we can see that this Society was responsible for the education in the city of 346 pupils in its 4 schools. However, although they were supposed not to be subject to any denominational control, all the pupils attending were Roman Catholics and all their teachers were Church of Ireland. We should also note the fact that many of these schools were not only schools. In the parish of St. Nicholas, for example, where the Society had two schools, a male school (71) and a female school (72), these schools were located in the House of Industry. As far as I can gather these children were orphans and were cared for under the terms of the Poor Law Acts, which also set up the Workhouse. In the House of Industry the children were put to work but it was presumably felt that the Society would fulfil the obligation to educate the children.

This policy did not work smoothly, however, and there was considerable opposition from influential sources. O'Connell opposed it and he sought separate education for each religion. One bishop, Bishop Doyle of Kildare, contradicted this by saying; "I do not know any measure which would prepare the way for a better feeling in Ireland than uniting the children at an early age".

Finally, in 1831 it was proposed that a Board of Commissioners of National Education be set up in Ireland to administer state aid to school committees, which had to fulfil four basic requirements:

1. A fund sufficient to defray the cost of annual repairs to the school house and furniture.
2. A permanent salary for the teacher.
3. A sum sufficient to purchase books and stationary at half price.
4. If necessary 1/3 of the cost of a new school building

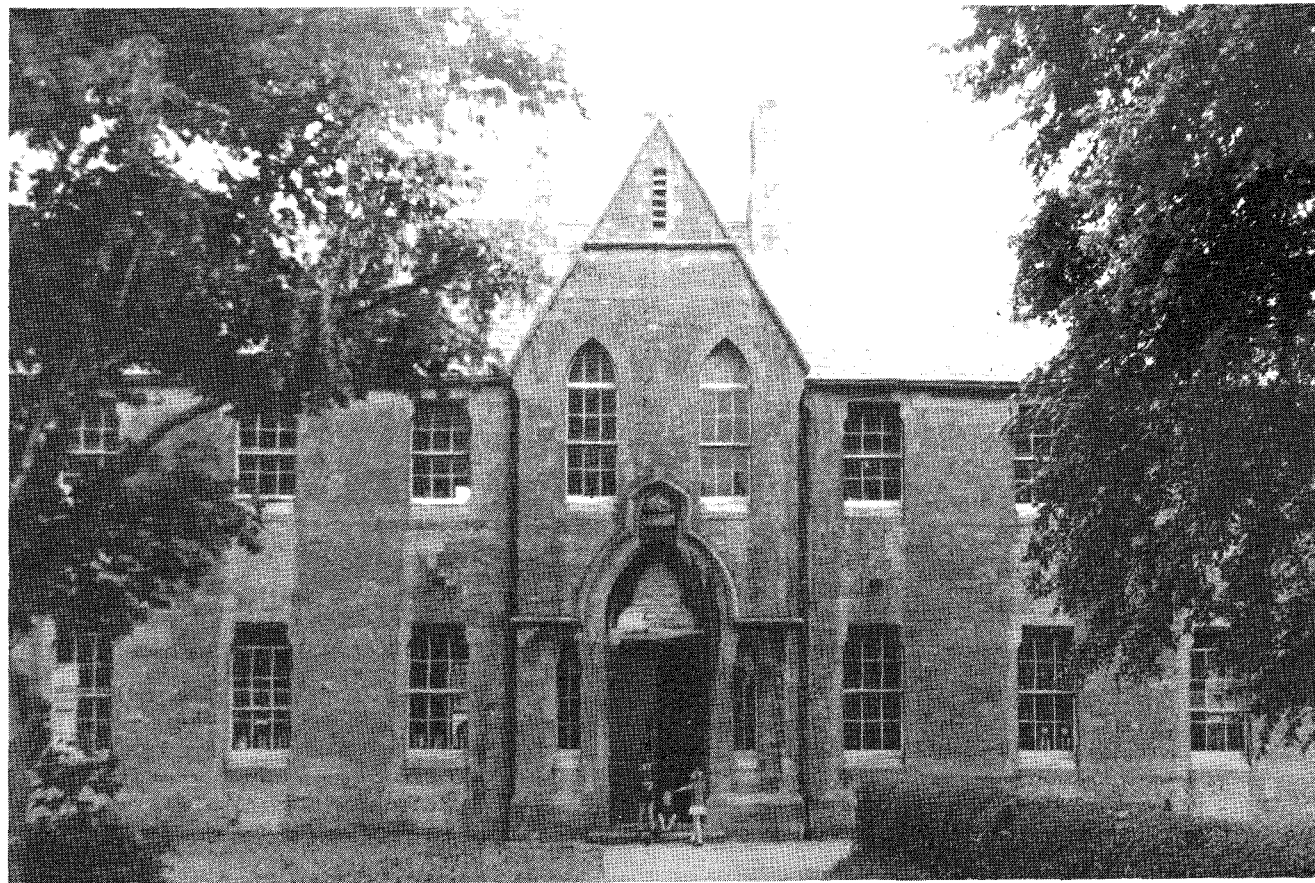


Bishop John Ryan.

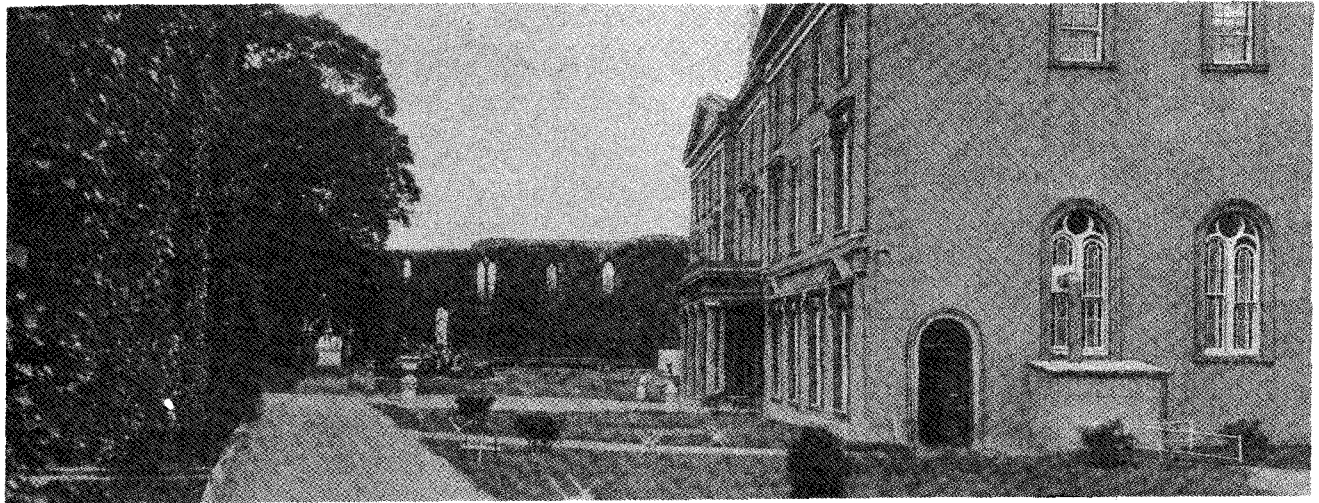
would be provided if the building was vested in the commissioners.

In order to carry out its regulations the board appointed inspectors.

As expected the main source of opposition to these proposals came from the Established Church the main reason being was it felt that its control was imperilled. It did not mind the idea of mixed education, as long as it did not mean mixed control. Anglican preference for denominationalism was shown by the founding of the Church Education Society in 1839. Despite appeals by Sir John Beresford to Sir Robert Peel, he failed to produce



The old St. John's Convent School.



St. Mary Convent, with the Dominican Priory in the background.

any government aid. Many parents preferred to send their children to the national government schools, where the standard of teaching was much higher.

In 1847 the Church Education society arranged to have its teachers trained by the Kildare Place Society. In 1854 all the schools previously run by C.E.S. were taken over by the Kildare Place Society. By 1860, however, the financial strain had become too great and Archbishop Beresford told his clergy to yield to the national system and to make arrangements as best they could. This would obviously have affected the C.E.S.'s four schools being run by the Kildare Place Society in Limerick. In the 1825 report there were four schools but in the 1835 follow-up report there was no reference to any of these schools.

The reason for this move is significant, as it involved the transfer of approximately 450 pupils, or else the Society no longer maintained its relation with these schools, and so I feel that either the pupils remained in the same schools but under new management, or else they were attracted away to the new schools being set up about this period by the Catholic teaching orders.

In contrast to the decline of the Church of Ireland-run schools (whose pupils included many Catholics) there was a dramatic increase in Catholic free schools.

Up to about 1850 bishops such as Bishop Doyle found the mixed system of education very acceptable, but later on there was strong opposition from bishops like Dr. John McHale of Tuam and later from Cardinal Cullen, who became archbishop in 1850. These bishops insisted on: "A Catholic education, on Catholic principles with Catholic teachers, using Catholic textbooks."

In Limerick the Catholic bishop Dr. Ryan subscribed to these principles. For this reason he set out to establish a completely Catholic-dominated education in Limerick, and, as we can see from the influx of teaching orders which resulted, he was very successful. From the table below we can see the orders and when they came. But it is my view that Dr. Ryan was also motivated by the poverty and destitution of the people at the time, which, according to travellers' accounts, were absolutely appalling. It is doubtful if the people would have benefited from education if their hardships were not alleviated to some extent by these orders. Therefore, it is my opinion that, while Bishop Ryan was responsible for the great influx of teaching orders at the time, he did so as much in an effort to counteract poverty as for political reasons. The list of religious orders and the dates of their arrival was as follows:

Order of School	Date of Arrival
1. Convent of Mercy	1838
2. Presentation Sisters	1837
3. Good Shepherd	1848
5. Redemptorists	1851
6. St. Munchin's College (Jesuit)	1859

The Christian Brothers, who arrived in 1817, had expanded from the original number of 4 teachers to having schools in St. Mary's, St. Munchin's, St. John's and St. Michael's parishes, as well as their head house in Sexton Street. The Sisters of Mercy opened a second school shortly after arrival in the Ballinacurra area.

The government position in relation to these schools is rather interesting. As a result of the strict denominational structures imposed both by the Church of Ireland and the Catholic Church on the schools, the government refused any state aid to these schools. This effected standards very much but most of all in the Church of Ireland schools, which had to carry a much heavier financial burden than the Catholic schools because the Catholic teachers were religious and full-time and demanded no salary, and whose vows of poverty were also useful. This situation meant that standards dropped in the Church of Ireland schools and many parents at this period preferred to send their children to the government-aided national schools. As a result, there was an immediate reduction in the numbers attending Church of Ireland schools after the financial aid was withdrawn. The Catholic schools continued as they had done and were not affected by the loss of finance from the government, as they continued to keep 84% of the school-going population.

I have dealt more with the development and change in Limerick education as a result of decisions taken at higher levels, religious and political. I have not dealt with the quality of the teaching or curriculum of the schools at the time as this would demand a much deeper and more extensive survey. It is clear how the transfer was made from the private fee-paying schools to the national government-aided education system and how this changed again to the private Catholic-dominated system. This we saw was only made possible as the result of a great influx of teaching orders into Limerick city, mainly as the result of the work of Bishop Ryan. Many of the orders that came then are still here and have further developed and flourished. Thus the strength of the religious orders in Limerick education today, especially in the secondary sector, can be traced back to the movements and changes of the 1830-'60 period.