Kildimo Seminary, Co. Limerick, 1808-1817

MICHAEL QUANE

The withdrawal towards the end of the eighteenth century of the Penal Laws hitherto in operation restricting the education of Catholic children in Ireland, induced the various Protestant organisations then engaged in the project of diverting the children from the religion of their forefathers to vary their methods. The work of proselytism was being effected mainly through the schools, and it was realised that this work was being hampered in large measure by the fact that the teachers employed therein were inefficient and ill-suited as instructors of youth. It was realised that the main cause of this defect was that the teachers had no training and were not conditioned for their work. The Incorporated Society for the Promotion of Working Protestant Schools in Ireland, which had received its charter in 1733, had always recruited the masters and mistresses of its many schools from among the young men and women, pupils of the schools, selected to act as ushers or under-masters therein. The Society accordingly decided to set up a Teachers Institution in which selected pupils of their schools “who appeared to be most likely, by their temper, habits, and conduct, and by their application and abilities, to benefit themselves and the country,” would be placed on the foundation of the Institution.

The Association for Discouraging Vice and Promoting the Knowledge and Practice of the Christian Religion had originated in 1792, and was incorporated in 1800. Its stated object was “to stem the baseful torrent of infidelity and immorality which was making progress throughout Ireland,” and this end it aimed to achieve by distributing religious tracts and the Protestant version of the Bible amongst the Catholic population. Financial aid towards the activities of the Association was received from the British Parliament annually from 1801. This enabled the Association to assist the clergy of the then Established Church in setting up the parochial schools which they were required by the Act of 28 Henry VIII to establish. This aid was provided on the stipulation that the schools so subsidised would be connected with the Association. Several hundred schools were thus supported, but the question of the suitability and competence of the masters and mistresses did not immediately arise as the Association required that as far as possible the masters should hold also positions as Parish Clerks, as it was thought “that this union of offices would be advantageous by increasing the respectability of the individual who holds them.”

The London Hibernian Society was yet another organisation which had a connection with the primary schools dispersed throughout the country. The Society originated in 1806 through the efforts “of a few benevolent individuals whose deep concern in the lamentable ignorance of the great bulk of the Irish peasantry prompted them to take steps within the limits of somewhat limited resources towards the religious and moral improvement of the lower orders in Ireland.” The Society was largely supported
by private contributions, and did not receive any aid from Parliament. It was, however, subsidised to a considerable extent by the Association for Discountenancing Vice, and its objects were achieved principally by the employment of bible-readers who toured the country distributing religious tracts and visiting the homes of the people and the schools. Very many schools became associated with the Society through the gift of reading material for the use of the pupils, since school books were not available. In some cases, too, the Society gave a modest contribution towards the teacher’s remuneration. The Society did not, however, concern itself with the qualifications or appointment of teachers, but, as indicated, concentrated its endeavours towards turning the bulk of the population from the Catholic faith, and the schools were an obvious means towards this end. In a recent publication by an authoritative writer, it is pointed out that “during the last years of the eighteenth century and the first three or four decades of the nineteenth, a second reformation was attempted in Ireland. The Protestant denominations made a concerted effort to wean the Irish from Romanism. Bible Societies and all manner of missions to the Popish Irish flourished. Most important were the Protestant education societies,” and the most aggressive of the proselytising societies was, according to the writer, the London Hibernian Society.

The Society for the Education of the Poor of Ireland was founded in 1811. It was later known as the Kildare Place Society and it began its work in the building in School Street, Dublin, in which a school had been operating since 1786. From the outset, the Society was very successful and Daniel O'Connell became associated with it. He later severed his connection when it became obvious that it had become a proselytising organisation. This Society was, however, in early receipt of Parliamentary aid which was liberally granted up to the establishment of the National School system in 1831. Soon after its foundation, the Society realised the necessity for the provision of facilities for the training of schoolmasters. A model school was established which was intended as a Seminary for such training, and the Society announced that “This Seminary is open for the admission of all persons properly recommended, and desirous of learning the improved method of teaching, without any charge being made for tuition; and also without any condition being imposed as to regulation of the schools in which they may afterwards be engaged. The time required to communicate sufficient information in this way, to a man who has been previously qualified to teach in the ordinary manner, is from four to six weeks; and where masters have to be educated for schools established on the principles recommended by the Society, and their conduct whilst attending the Model School shall be deserving of encouragement, the Society will defray the expenses of such persons, whilst travelling to and from Dublin, and during the period of their tuition; provided that, in no instance, a larger sum than five guineas shall be so expended . . . . As the most perfect system of instruction, must be of comparatively little value, where the master is incompetent, the Society anxiously recommends all persons desirous of having schoolmasters of their own nomination, trained in the seminary, to be extremely careful in the selection of persons for that purpose. Their age should be not less than eighteen nor more than thirty years; they ought to have a competent knowledge of the rudiments of spelling, reading, writing, and arithmetic; in temper they should be patient, in disposition mild, but firm, of diligent habits, of unblemished moral character, and fully con-

vinced of the importance of inculcating on the young mind a love of decency and cleanliness, of industry, honesty and truth.”

Like many other school-teachers of his time, the master of the school under the management of Rev. Samuel Jones in Co. Wicklow became involved in the Rising of 1798, whereupon Mr. Jones himself took over the instruction of the pupils, rather than to entrust them to a possibly disloyal individual. From 1800 he utilised the services of a partially educated young man as assistant. “In a short time the young man became an excellent schoolmaster; and from this circumstance originated the plan of forming a seminary for training schoolmasters in Ireland. Nothing impeded the attempt but the want of means; these, however, were liberally supplied by donations exceeding £1,000 from some distinguished persons in England, among whom was Mr. Wilberforce, and an experimental school was opened by Mr. Jones for three years in 1806. In 1808 Mr. Jones was promoted to the perpetual cure of Kildimo in the diocese of Limerick; the Seminary was removed to that place also.”

Soon after taking up residence in Kildimo, Rev. Samuel Jones sought and obtained assistance from the British Parliament for his proposed Seminary there. In 1810 he received a grant of £37. 10. 0. “in aid of supporting a Seminary for Parish Clerks and Schoolmasters” and in 1809 the grant was increased to £50. A similar grant of £50 was made in 1810. Mr. Jones approached also the Association for Discountenancing Vice &c., and obtained from it an annual grant of £50 towards the support and education of nine young men in the Seminary. After a few years the Association increased their annual grant to £100 as from 1812, on the condition that fifteen young men would from thenceforward be maintained and trained in the Seminary. The Association had also at an earlier stage made a grant of £100 towards the rehabilitation of the school building, and this was further supplemented by similar grants of £100.

It has been recorded that “Young men not less than eighteen years of age, are received here as vacancies occur, and after a probation of two months, are continued on the establishment, if their conduct and capacity be approved of. They are instructed in reading, writing, and arithmetic on Dr. Bell’s improved method. Those who display ability are taught book-keeping, English grammar, geography, geometry, trigonometry, mensuration, navigation and algebra, and by this diversity of attainments different masters are prepared for different situations. A master is usually qualified in eighteen months. Those pupils who have a good voice are instructed in psalmody, and qualified for parish clerks. A select but very useful library is attached to the seminary. Fifty schools have been already supplied from hence, and among the rest the original school in the county of Wicklow.”

The names of schoolmasters trained at Kildimo are given in various publications on schools. The Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry stated in 1825 that, between 1807 and 1817 “Eighty-nine persons, whose ages varied from eighteen to twenty-four years were there boarded and educated, and we have been assured that many of them became qualified for the stations to

---

3. Sixth Report of the Society for Educating the Poor of Ireland, 1818.
4. Pat Nugent, a schoolmaster from the neighbourhood of Enniskerry, was one of a group of Catholics who were marched, with pitch-caps on, from County Wicklow to Dublin prior to the Rising. His murder is described by Rev. M. V. Ronan in ‘98 in Wicklow (Rev. Luke Curran, ed.), Wexford 1938.
8. e.g. Schools of Kildare and Leighlin, by M. Brenan, Dublin 1935, pp. 277 and 594.
which they were destined. After a time however it was found necessary to institute an inquiry into certain abuses which were said to have prevailed in the management of the funds of the institution, and it was in consequence entirely broken up.8 The Association for Discountenancing Vice &c., on receipt of these reports on certain irregularities in the management of the affairs at Kildimo, requested the Commissioners of Education, who had been set up in 1813, to make the necessary inquiry in this matter. The charges of mismanagement and misappropriation were directed solely against Rev. Samuel Jones, the founder of the Seminary. It was most unfortunate for him that the Commissioners of Education empowered their secretary, Chamberlain William Walker, to proceed to Kildimo to conduct the requisite inquiry there, for this man was himself a thief and was at this time actively misappropriating monies intended for distribution by the Commissioners for the benefit of the various endowed schools under their jurisdiction.9 On his arrival at Kildimo, Walker placed several people who had connections with the Seminary under oath, and obtained statements from them, threatening any who were reluctant with fines. He finally formulated the following seven charges against Rev. Samuel Jones, to each of which Mr. Jones replied:

1. Claiming credit from the Association for Discountenancing Vice &c., as well as from the public, for considerable sums set forth in accounts furnished by him to the Association for maintenance of the young men who passed through the Seminary from 1808 to 1813, when such sums had not really been expended in the manner and to the amount therein stated; and the like for masters' salaries and servants' wages.

2. Charging the said Association and the public with divergent sums, for building and other works, not expended in fact to the amount and in manner set forth by him.

3. Charging the Association and the public with certain sums for furniture bought by him between the years 1808 and 1813, which had not been laid out; also for clothing for the young men more than had been supplied, through which overrated expenditure Mr. Jones is charged to have received from the Association and the public (in addition to other sums not justly accounted for) the sum of £370 sterling, alleged by Mr. Jones to have been due to him, as for and on account of a balance on advances and expenditure made by him for the use and benefit of the Institution at Kildimo.

---

8 First Report of the Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry, 1825, p. 34.
9 Chamberlain William Walker died in December 1825 leaving the affairs of the Commissioners in complete confusion as stated in their Report for that year. In their Report for 1829 to the Lord Lieutenant, the Commissioners stated that they had discovered "since the death of the late secretary of this Board and the appointment of his successor that the late secretary had for a considerable time past carried on a system of fraud, and under cover of his office as secretary contrived to get into his possession several sums of money part of the rents of several school estates subject to the control of this Board, which was effected by his having communicated to the agents of some of the school estates false and pretended orders as if made by this Board requiring such agents to remit money to him under pretence of its being wanted for the purposes and objects of the Board, when no such directions were given by the Commissioners of Education or any of them, and the late secretary used various artifices to prevent the Commissioners from acquiring a knowledge of his frauds, and in some instances made false entries in the minutes of their proceedings, and spoliating papers and vouchers entrusted to him as secretary. His chief depredations were committed on the funds of Cavan school . . . . It has been discovered since his death that as long ago as the year 1816 shortly after his appointment as secretary he appropriated to his own use certain funds amounting to £422. 0. 10 of the late currency being principal and arrear of interest thereon belonging to the parochial schools of Ballintemple and Fethard . . . ." Walker had died utterly insolvent and the gross total of his defalcations was never publicised. The Commissioners accounts were not subject to audit.
4. Departing from the proper objects of the Institution, in sending out the pupils in many instances incompletely educated and disqualified for arduous situations after a short period passed in the Seminary, and with little pains used to instruct them.

5. Feeding the students of the Seminary in a manner unsuitable to the health and proper maintenance of its inmates.

6. Converting the property of the Seminary to his own private use, in various respects, employing the students in his service on the most menial offices, and the servants paid for the Seminary in labour and employment for himself and family.

7. Suffering irregularities to prevail and idleness and neglect of education to exist in the Seminary, and permitting the Institution to become discreditable in the eyes of the public, as being rendered unanswerable to the declared objects of the foundation and inadequate to the sums of money hitherto supposed to have been devoted to it.

In the opinion of the compiler of this paper, Mr. Walker dealt very inadequately and unconvincingly with the various charges, and concluded the report on the following note of high principle: "The establishment or refutation of the 7th charge (however too futile for serious refutation it has been styled by Mr. Jones in his reply to all the charges) seems nevertheless to be closely connected with the truth or falsehood of every one of the preceding. If the statements, coming from the head of such an establishment, or adopted by him, which relate to the expenditure and particular details of a public institution be discovered, or be known to the whole or any of its members to be misrepresentations in matters of fact, or exaggerated in any respect; if all be not quite transparent in the view of the part he has held in it, the doubts, the inquiries, the surprise, until matters are explained, and explained satisfactorily they could not be, without a formal and well authorised investigation; there is no great room for wonder that the seeds of irregularity should spring spontaneous in such a state of the soil, that application should give way to idleness, and that the assistant master and caterer themselves should be diverted from their regular occupation and duty to idleness and insubordination, or neglect of education by the assistant master, whose time has been so much engaged in the exertion of a laudable desire to serve and aid the defence of the superintendent as that of the students can have been idled in caballing on their side; surely the effects must be attributed to the true cause, although remotely perceptible; and any discredit attaching to the character of the Institution, or injury to the confidence it ought to hold in the eyes of the public that administered to its existence and is drawn upon for its supplies, must be considered due to the superintendent, who has in my opinion given too many grounds for this inquiry."\(^{10}\)

Walker's report on Kildimo Seminary was considered by the Commissioners of Education at their meeting on the 1st of October, 1817, and at a further meeting in the same month they decided that the report, together with details of the evidence taken and the books of the Seminary, be transmitted to the Association for Discountenancing Vice &c., for such action as was considered necessary. The Association promptly suppressed the Seminary and Rev. Samuel Jones was relieved of all further connection with it, no steps being taken towards giving him an opportunity of refuting any of the charges made against him in Walker's report. In the following year he did, however, find it desirable to take notice of current rumours affecting his honesty,

---

\(^{10}\) First Report of the Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry, 1825, pp. 400-3.
and he published a *Statement of Facts connected with the Dissolution of Kildimo Seminary for Schoolmasters by Rev. Samuel Jones, Rector of Ardcanny and Prebendary of the Cathedral of Limerick.* It is clear from this publication that whilst Mr. Jones may have been remiss and perhaps incompetent in his methods of keeping accounts and records, he was not deliberately dishonest and that the charges which had been framed against him were not founded on fact. He was held in high repute by his fellow clergymen, and had been collated to the prebend of Ardcanny in the diocese of Limerick on the 15th of February, 1817, a few months before Mr. Walker's descent on Kildimo.

In its annual report for the year 1826, the Association for Discountenancing Vice referred to the abandonment of the project at Kildimo for the training of parish clerks and schoolmasters, and indicated that "The Association has lately determined on making a second attempt of the same nature—an arrangement has been made for that purpose with the Governors of the Foundling Hospital, Dublin, and apartments in that building are now preparing." This experiment did not succeed, and the Association then set up a Seminary for the purpose in the principal school in Dublin with which it was connected.

---

11 Printed in Dublin, 1828.