

# The efforts of Sir Richard Bourke in Promoting National Education

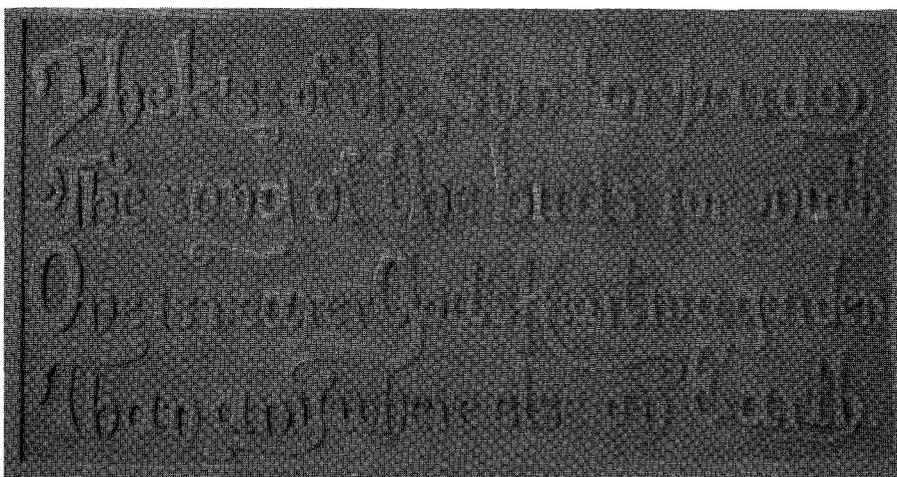
## In Ireland and New South Wales, 1828-1855

**G**reat public excitement greeted the arrival of Sir Richard Bourke as Governor of New South Wales in 1831. News that he was 'a Whig in politics and a liberal in religion'<sup>1</sup> had preceded him. Unlike his immediate predecessor, the dour Tory, Governor Ralph Darling, Bourke and his family were the toasts of Sydney, as guns boomed and fireworks lit the sky as the general public continued to celebrate well into the night.<sup>2</sup> Bourke's wife, Elizabeth, had barely survived the journey because of a rheumatic condition, and subsequently died six months later. His youngest daughter, Anne, assumed the role of hostess at the Governor's residence, a task she performed admirably.<sup>3</sup>

Born in Dublin in 1777, Bourke was educated at Westminster School, London, and later gained his B.A. at Oxford. He was a relative of the Irish Whig statesman, Edmund Burke, with whom he spent a number of vacations in his youth,<sup>4</sup> and was undoubtedly influenced by the views of his mentor. In 1798 Bourke enlisted in the Grenadier Guards and fought in the Napoleonic Wars, where he sustained a debilitating injury to his jaw before retiring to Thornfield, his country estate near Limerick. In 1826, he accepted the position of Acting Governor of a province in South Africa. Two years later he returned to Thornfield.

Bourke was renowned for his humanitarian beliefs and became a loyal defender of the largely Roman Catholic population of his district.<sup>5</sup> Not one for republican sentiments, he nevertheless confessed to a close military colleague, 'England will one day or other rue the mischievous policy which she has invariably adopted to my unfortunate country.'<sup>6</sup> An advocate for the oppressed Irish peasantry, Bourke gave evidence on their behalf to the 1825 'Select Committee of the House of Lords to Enquire into the Nature and Extent of the Disturbances in Ireland':

The lowest orders of Roman Catholics in Ireland are aware that they labour under certain civil disabilities .... there are instances of partiality in the administration of the laws by justices;



Woodcarving made at Ahane School, c. 1880. (Limerick Museum).

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by Max Waugh

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where favour has been shown to a Protestant to the prejudice of a Catholic.<sup>7</sup>

Asked his opinion on the selection and conduct of the local constabulary he stated:

I think that upon first formation of the constables several very bad subjects were brought in .... two or three constables have been tried for murder and acquitted. Almost all of the police sent down to Limerick were Orangemen, who began to wear Orange insignia.<sup>8</sup>

Questioned on whether he had observed the conduct of the Catholic priests in respect to the 'disturbances' Bourke replied:

I am bound to say that I attribute the tranquillity which prevailed in this district in a great measure, to the good conduct of the Catholic clergy.<sup>9</sup>

Bourke assured the Committee that the peasantry on his estate had an 'anxious desire' to send their offspring to school, and that the requirement for the reading

of the Scriptures was being met, with the co-operation of the Catholic clergyman using the Douay Testament (Catholic approved).<sup>10</sup>

In that same year Bourke provided written evidence to the House of Commons Commissioners of Education Enquiry. His evidence was in the form of a letter condemning the restrictions on the 'Irish Lord Lieutenants Fund' which placed the responsibility of appointing the master and mistress of a school entirely in the hands of the local Anglican clergyman:

To this clause I objected on the grounds that being the patron of the school, giving my land to build it on, a subscription double that of any other person and having placed the building within two hundred yards of my house, for the purpose of enabling my family at all times to superintend the conduct of the master, mistress and pupils ... it was exceedingly unpleasant to Mrs. Bourke and me, and prejudiced to the success of the school to have a master and a mistress put in, of whom we might not have approved.<sup>11</sup>

In reply to his complaint, Bourke was given the authority to appoint two teachers, provided the Bishop approved. He replied that as the Bishop of Killaloe, Dr. Mant, had refused his nominations 'I declined in consequence to receive the

[42 & 43 Vict.] *Mungret Agricultural School, &c.* [Ch. ccxx.]



CHAPTER CCXX.

An Act to enable the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, with the assent of Her Majesty's Treasury, to vary the Trusts of the Mungret Agricultural School and Model Farm in the county of Limerick. A.D. 1879.  
[15th August 1879.]

WHEREAS under and by virtue of an Act passed in the eleventh and twelfth years of the reign of Her Majesty, intituled "An Act to vest in Her Majesty the property of the Irish Reproductive Loan Fund Institution, and to dissolve the said institution," the sum of four thousand and seventy-nine pounds nine shillings and sevenpence, being the sum recovered from the county of Limerick of the moneys originally appropriated out of the said loan fund, became applicable for such charitable purposes or objects of public utility within the county of Limerick not otherwise provided for in whole or in part by local rate or assessment, including the instruction in and the promotion of agricultural science in the said county, as the Lord Lieutenant or other chief governor or governors of Ireland, with the consent of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury, would from time to time appoint: 11 & 12 Vict. c. 114.

And whereas the said sum was accordingly directed and appointed by His Excellency the then Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, with the consent of the Lords Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury, to be applied and disposed of towards the instruction and promotion of agricultural science in the county of Limerick by the establishment of a model agricultural school for the said county:

And whereas the said sum of four thousand and seventy-nine pounds nine shillings and sevenpence was by order of said Lords Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury bearing date the eleventh day of May one thousand eight hundred and fifty-two directed to be paid and handed over to the Paymaster of Civil Services in Ireland to be by him transferred to trustees to be appointed by His Excellency the Lord Lieutenant for the establishment of such model agricultural school:

[Local.-220.]

Act of Parliament enabling the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to vary the Trusts of Mungret Agricultural School and Model Farm, 1879.

(Limerick Museum).

grant.<sup>12</sup> As the children from the Thornfield school came almost exclusively from Catholic families, Bourke invariably appointed only teachers of that faith.<sup>13</sup>

Bourke turned instead to the newly established (1811) Kildare Place Society and was granted the desired assistance. Unlike the other predominantly Protestant education societies whose main desire was to proselytise Catholic youth, the Kildare Place Society purported to offer a much more secular education (initially at least) allowing the Scriptures to be read only 'without note or comment'. The Society's central committee of prominent Dublin businessmen had two Catholics amongst the mainly Anglican representatives, making it more palatable to the Catholic hierarchy. Whilst the Society favoured a 'mixed' clientele, it was inevitable that most of the schools were dominated by either Catholics or Protestants. Districts

with a majority of Catholics were allowed to appoint teachers of that faith, with the result that the Society soon became one of the largest of the education societies, and supported by the main religious denominations. The Government provided a teacher and contributed towards the cost of new buildings, furniture and general maintenance.<sup>14</sup>

The Kildare Place school on Bourke's property was known as the Ahane School. Situated in the Parish of Killeenagarraiff, it was built in 1823 with a subsidy of £50 from the Society, a further £50 being granted for an extension a year later. Bourke, the manager and patron of the school, appointed James Neale and his wife as master and mistress, on salaries of £7-10-0 and £5-0-0 p.a. respectively, paid by the Society. In addition, Bourke paid the master £8 and the mistress £6 from his own pocket. The school opened with 47

male and 32 female pupils, almost exclusively from Catholic families, most of whom were tenants and labourers on the Thornfield estate.<sup>15</sup>

Whilst resident at Thornfield, Bourke had been influential in the drafting of some of the Irish National Board's regulations, as his best friend and fellow Whig, Thomas Spring Rice, the Member for Limerick, had sought his views. After pondering over the Report of the Commissioners of the Irish Education Enquiry (1825), he agreed with the recommendation to establish a 'properly constituted Board (representing the three major denominations) appointed by the Government.'<sup>16</sup> On the question of local boards, he advocated a local representative committee rather than a patron, 'or the management will fall into the hands of the Minister of the Parish and members of the 'Established Church' and the Catholic children will ultimately be withdrawn.'<sup>17</sup> He disagreed with Spring Rice's proposal on teacher salaries that advocated an annual government gratuity of five pounds, with the remaining ten pounds to be raised from local sources, which he believed would cripple or destroy many of the existing schools.<sup>18</sup> In emphasising his concerns on these matters, Bourke concluded 'I have had as you know some practical knowledge of Irish Schools and am tolerably well acquainted with the circumstances in the South of Ireland.'<sup>19</sup>

In 1826 Bourke was appointed Acting Governor of the Cape of Good Hope. The Governor, Lord Somerset, had offended many of the British and Dutch settlers and during his forced absence in England, Bourke was successful in restoring the peace. In his three years at the Cape, Bourke's more liberal beliefs helped usher in some welcome changes. Although a target himself, he reinstated freedom of the press and encouraged overseas trade opportunities (notably with N.S.W.), improved the conditions of slaves and eased restrictive 'pass laws' on the native Kaffirs and Hottentots.<sup>20</sup> Largely because of his successful administration in South Africa, Bourke was appointed Governor of New South Wales (1831-1838). Before leaving Ireland, Bourke gave instructions for the Ahane School to be transferred to the newly established Irish National School Board, as he was convinced that the new system would educate the Irish poor on a much grander scale, and reduce sectarian rivalry through its 'mixed schooling' philosophy.

It came as no surprise for Bourke to find that the enmity between Catholics and Protestants in England and Ireland was mirrored in the new colony. A growing uneasiness had soon developed in his relationship with the conservative Archdeacon (later Bishop) of Sydney, William Grant Broughton, who viewed the concessions made to the Catholic population by the Whig Government of Earl Grey, and instituted promptly through Bourke as Governor, with much disdain. Whilst both Broughton and Bourke were devout Anglicans, they had



Ahane School in February, 1992.

(Photo: Larry Walsh).

little else in common. Broughton, a Tory 'High Churchman' with strong links to the wealthy Protestant landholders, believed that the Church of England should have exclusive rights to government funding. Bourke had more in common with the emancipists, (many of whom were poor Catholics), and strongly opposed the now outdated 'Established Church' relationship, believing that 'state aid' should be granted to all churches in proportion to the number of their adherents.<sup>21</sup> Bourke's warm affinity with Father Therry and his Catholic community simply inflamed the situation, for he had much empathy with the oppressed under his command, being of 'mixed' lineage himself,<sup>22</sup> and consequently understood many of their grievances towards both the Government and the Established Church.

Recognising the potential for even greater hostility between Catholics and Protestants throughout the Colony, Bourke wrote to Lord Stanley, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, in September 1833, concerned about the Government's favoured status of the Established Church and its 'Church and School Corporation', a source of general complaint by the leaders of other denominations.<sup>23</sup> At that time the Government grant to the Church of England was £11,500, Catholics £1,500, and to the Presbyterians £600,<sup>24</sup> which, as Bourke pointed out, was inequitable and unjust. He also made an earnest appeal for a means of state funded 'National Schools', along similar lines to the Irish National system established by Stanley in 1831.<sup>25</sup>

Broughton was furious with the substance of the despatch and promptly boarded the next available ship to England to plead in person against Bourke's proposal. In the meantime, he had written

to the Bishop of London to intercede on his behalf.<sup>26</sup> As Bourke later confided to Spring Rice following Broughton's hasty departure:

There goes home in the same ship with this epistle, the Archdeacon of N.S. Wales, a very agreeable and as I believe a very amiable person, but a Tory in Politics and a determined high churchman ... he opposes the introduction of liberal measures ... and would keep the Presbyterians and Catholics in fetters and chains of iron.<sup>27</sup>

As a means of countering Broughton's influence in London, the Governor arranged for his son, Richard (who acted as his Private Secretary), to return to England also, where he was warmly accepted into Spring Rice's household and given access to confidential correspondence and accounts of conversations pertaining to the Archdeacon's visit.<sup>28</sup> But before a decision could be made on Bourke's proposal, Robert Peel's Tory Party had been swept into office (albeit for only six months) in 1834-35. Stanley, the new Colonial Secretary, wavered on the matter as he saw grave difficulties in transplanting the Irish system to Australia. Stanley at least had the support of Ireland's Archbishop Whately, whereas his counterpart in New South Wales was vehemently opposed. Finally, in April 1835, with the Whigs returned to power, the Colonial Office decided in favour of Bourke's proposal after fifteen months of indecision.

But in the meantime, Bourke's proposal had been strenuously opposed by the newly formed 'Protestant Association', headed by Broughton and some of his influential Anglican clergy, and Rev.

J.D. Lang, chief spokesman for the Presbyterians. The National system was roundly condemned from the pulpits as 'anti-scriptural', with Broughton declaring it a means of preparing the way 'for the ultimate establishment of Popery'.<sup>29</sup> Over the next few months the leading Sydney newspapers joined in the fray. *The Sydney Herald*, mouthpiece of the landholders and Protestant to the core, conceded its value in Ireland where Catholics outnumbered Protestants five to one, but in England, Scotland and New South Wales, where the reverse was the case, National Education was deemed to be unnecessary.<sup>30</sup> Voicing concerns of the Presbyterians, *The Colonist* openly criticised the Governor and 'his Irish System' for insinuating that the Bible 'was not a fit book for youth to read unrestricted'.<sup>31</sup>

Realising that without the support of the powerful Church of England, National Education was doomed, Bourke reluctantly decided to abandon the cause. Instead he revised the regulations for State Aid to church schools through his 'Church Act' of 1836. This had the effect of breaking the monopoly of the Church of England and providing a more equitable distribution by subsidising Catholic and Presbyterian schools as well, on a per capita 'pound for pound' basis.<sup>32</sup> Other 'dissenting' denominations like the Methodists and Independents were added to the list several years later. The legislation was drawn up by the Attorney General, John Hubert Plunkett, who together with another prominent Catholic layman, Judge Roger Therry, had become Bourke's close confidants and supporters. Both were to become key players in the eventual introduction of National Schools in 1848, long after Bourke had departed.<sup>33</sup> His daughter, Anne, had married Edward

Deas Thomson, the Clerk of the Legislative Council in Sydney, during his governorship, and as Deas Thomson had been promoted to Colonial Secretary just before Bourke's exit, she stayed on in New South Wales. Deas Thomson, of Scottish 'Tory stock', was to be greatly revered by a succession of colonial governors, and served as a member of the Select Committee on Education in 1844 which strongly endorsed the call for the introduction of National Education. With his good friends Plunkett and Therry,<sup>34</sup> he assisted Governor Fitzroy in the introduction of National Schools some four years later.<sup>35</sup>

Bourke's seven year administration of N.S.W. was regarded by the masses as 'able, honest and benevolent'.<sup>36</sup> But he was treated with disdain by the exclusive element in the Legislative Council, largely because of his opposition to the wealthy squatters and their friends in the press (notably the *Sydney Herald*). His friend, Francis Forbes, Chief Justice of New South Wales, aptly described his predicament: 'You are, in short, a Whig governor in the midst of High Tory councillors'.<sup>37</sup> He supported emancipists in their right to vote, opposed further transportation and curbed the powers of magistrates in disciplining aborigines and convicts. The system of trial by jury was reconstituted and a tribunal created to determine a more equitable distribution of land. Realising only too well the restricting powers of an appointed Legislative Council, Bourke lobbied for a two-third elective representation on the Council, a concept that was finally approved in 1842, several years after his departure.<sup>38</sup> Bourke visited the isolated Port Phillip District in 1837 and arranged for land to be measured before sale and for street plans to be drawn for the small but thriving town of Melbourne.<sup>39</sup> The city's main esplanade, Bourke Street, still bears his name. Under his jurisdiction the economy of the Colony was placed in a much firmer footing and immigration was encouraged.<sup>40</sup> But he deeply regretted being unable to introduce National schooling to the colony, which he saw as a viable solution (albeit long-term) to the sectarian intolerance of Ireland and New South Wales.<sup>41</sup>

When Bourke announced his intention to resign in 1837, the news was greeted with general dismay, particularly amongst the lower classes. Shortly after Bourke's departure, his esteemed friend, Roger Therry, organised a public subscription and erected a monument in his honour which now stands by the entrance to the Mitchell Library in Sydney. Underneath the bronze statue is inscribed a long list of his achievements, none perhaps more worthy of mention than his tireless efforts in promoting public education in New South Wales:

He established religious equality on a just and firm basis and sought to provide for all, without distinction of sect, a sound and adequate system of National Education.<sup>42</sup>

*I think it should have been known that we had the best school system in any colony with 2000 children to feed.*

*Part W. Victoria  
4 Sep 1848*

*My dear Mr. Rice*

I did not send you the enclosed till I had received the additional accounts which I have been furnished with this afternoon. I have taken care that it is printed. I shall take care that it is given to you. I think you will find that it is general against creating any new or expanding any old responsibility.

*As this money that can be recovered will be for the use & benefit of our own country - I think it should be certified to our share of about 5000 for the schools in Victoria*

I think my own first duty should be to get the accounts carefully revised, so as to show the actual number & amount of notes outstanding & the names & residences of the borrowers & their sureties. We should then examine either through country gentlemen, or at Petty Sessions or the County Courts, to trace the parties & their sureties. I see how by reason of some cases of fraudulent indulgence, or other, the money can be got in.

I have had a meeting of the committee, & have had a resolution passed for a resolution to be taken that if the money is not repaid, it should be called together.

Always affly yours  
M. Spring Rice

Letter from Thomas Spring Rice, Lord Monteagle, to Sir Richard Bourke, 4 September 1848, re. the Limerick Reproductive Loan Fund.

(Courtesy Seamus Flynn).

On his return to Ireland in 1838, Bourke lived his remaining seventeen years in retirement at Thornfield. He began editing the correspondence of Edmund Burke for publication, and in 1839 was appointed High Sheriff of Co. Limerick. Offers of the governorship of Jamaica, the commander-in-chief of the army in India, and a parliamentary endorsement for Limerick were all refused over the next few years, but a promotion to the rank of General was accepted in 1851.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout his retirement, Bourke continued as manager of the Ahane National School. Local regulations of the school published in October, 1850, show that fees of two shillings per quarter were

paid by parents or guardians considered by the manager to be 'in circumstances enabling them to make such payments' for their children.<sup>44</sup> Provision was made by the National Board in Dublin for pupils to be enrolled gratuitously where written evidence of such need was supplied. Absences in excess of twenty days per quarter without sufficient reason would result in a child being removed from the school register. Weekdays after school and the whole of Saturdays were set apart for religious instruction if required.<sup>45</sup>

For most of his life Bourke maintained a keen interest in agriculture, and in retirement was Chairman of the Limerick Agricultural Society.<sup>46</sup> Besides a contin-

uing interest in the Ahane elementary schools, Bourke was also involved in the siting and establishment of the Limerick Model Agricultural School, which opened in 1856. Instruction in agriculture became a feature of Irish National Education in 1837 when two model agricultural schools were opened in Co. Donegal and Co. Tyrone, both under local management. A model school for the training of teachers of agriculture was completed in 1838 at Glasnevin, with the Commissioners as patrons. By 1868 twenty-one model agricultural were operating throughout Ireland.<sup>47</sup>

Bourke's involvement in the Limerick Model Agricultural School is shown in a request to the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Clarendon, in 1849, for funds to cover the initial establishment costs of £7,000 for land, buildings, furniture and stock.<sup>48</sup> To help defray the expense it was planned to take in fifty pupil boarders, 'robust youths' about sixteen years of age, each paying £10 annually, and to provide their own 'decent' clothing. The boarders would undertake all the labouring tasks around the farm, including the stables, dairy and the garden. In addition they would make their own beds and clean out the halls and dormitories and 'do other tasks as required'.<sup>49</sup>

Several months passed before the National Board Commissioners were informed that a farm of 140 acres at nearby Mungret was to be sold, which was ideal for the purpose. Bishop Higgins, Bourke and other local gentry had £460 in hand (the profit from the Limerick Cattle Show) and had already applied to the Lord Lieutenant for permission to use £4,350 (the balance remaining in the Limerick Reproductive Fund) to complete the purchase. Accommodation for 250 boys, 150 girls and 120 infants was envisaged along with provision for twenty pupil teachers and two resident masters. Both the Catholic and Church of Ireland bishops were ready to lend support. Although the local Protestant rector and his curate were not in favour of the National system, they had been 'instructed' by their bishop to conduct religious instruction when required.<sup>50</sup>

The Mungret property was purchased and a model agricultural school opened late in 1856. Subjects to be taught in the senior classes included chemistry, botany, geology, animal and vegetable physiology, and practical agriculture.<sup>51</sup> Bourke did not attend the opening as he had died suddenly twelve months previously at the age of seventy-eight. His contribution to the Ahane National School was immortalised in a memorial installed in the schoolroom soon afterwards. Initially William Howley succeeded as manager until his elder son, John M. Bourke, assumed the post in 1860.<sup>52</sup>

Sir Richard Bourke played a crucial role in the push for National Education into the eastern mainland states of Australia in the middle of the 19th century. Indeed, without his presence it is unlikely this system would have eventuated at all,

and the early introduction of a 'compulsory, secular and free' education in that country, beginning in Victoria in 1872, would have been greatly retarded. Even though Bourke was unable to see his wish come to pass during his period of office, he had inspired some influential colonial administrators like Plunkett, Therry and Deas Thomson to complete the task some eleven years later. He was, no doubt, kept informed of these developments through correspondence with Deas Thomson and his daughter, Anne, in his remaining years in Ireland. During his retirement, Bourke was visited by a number of his friends from New South Wales. Dr. John Bede Polding, Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, and his Vicar General, Dr. Ullathorne, (both supporters of Bourke's National Education efforts) visited Thornfield. The latter collected flowers from his garden to dry and press for Anne Deas Thomson back in Sydney. John Plunkett also paid him a visit while holidaying in Ireland.<sup>53</sup>

It is indeed ironic that Bourke's passion for public education could well have been achieved earlier had he not introduced his 'Church Act' before leaving office, for in giving the mainstream churches more equitable funds to operate their own schools, it gave them added strength and legitimacy in the continuing fight against the advocates of National schooling. Whilst Bourke's support for the cause in Ireland was certainly not as pivotal as in New South Wales, his contribution, particularly for the general education of the poor in Limerick, was significant, considering his involvement in other public and private duties. However, one wonders if he eventually became disillusioned with the developments of National Education in Ireland, for by the time of his death, the concept of a truly 'mixed' education was decidedly on the wane, giving way to a National System of government funded church schools instead.

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