

The control of education

THIS is a polemical book in the vein of D. H. Akenson's controversial study, *A Mirror to Kathleen's Face: Education in Independent Ireland 1922-1960*, which appeared from the same press in 1975. The present book covers much of the same ground, and indeed Professor Akenson has contributed the foreword. This short book argues the by now well-known thesis that Catholic Church interests dominated and stifled state action on education during the period from 1900 to 1921 and afterwards in the Free State. Titley argues that the "political leadership of the new Irish state never questioned the prerogatives which the Church claimed for itself in education." For Titley, the Catholic Church is the chief villain of the piece. Its interests were not educational but moral. Having long benefited from the lack of a lay leadership in Ireland, it eventually sought control over the production of such a leadership by control of schooling. Thus throughout the latter half of the 19th and the early 20th century, the Catholic hierarchy opposed secular, state control of education and supported sectarian (a word Titley uses for "denominational"), segregated clerically-controlled private schools, with undemocratic management and little role for lay teachers. This led in Titley's view to a narrow insular culture, remote from "the ideas and practices associated with modern industrial nations."

Titley outlines the 19th century origin of the National school system, the Intermediate board, technical and university education provisions. He shows that the national schools set up under the 1831 Act as non-denominational had by the mid-century become de facto denominational (ground already covered in detail by Akenson in *The Irish Education Experiment, 1970*). Nevertheless they were still opposed by members of the Hierarchy who were dissatisfied with their provisions for religious instruction. The system allowed that religious instruction could only be given at set times in the day, clearly marked by hanging a card proclaiming "Religious Instruction" on the classroom wall.

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The Christian Brothers withdrew from the National scheme in protest against this arrangement. The Hierarchy were also against the teacher training system known as the "Model Schools" because trainee teachers of different denominations boarded there together.

Titley does not dwell long on the National school system but gives a detailed account of the Intermediate Board system which was more acceptable to the Hierarchy because it left private schools intact and merely recognised them for examination purposes. Teachers were paid on a results system which left the lay teachers in a very precarious position. Titley details the fight by the ASTI (founded in 1909) to win proper contracts, salaries and recognition from the Catholic Headmasters' Association who were reluctant to relinquish their advantage. Under the system, lay teachers could be let go whenever a religious person, regardless of qualification, was available. Augustine Birrell played a large role in resolving the dispute which gave better pay to teachers, but left hiring and firing to the managers.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, the British government, through men like Birrell and later James Macpherson, attempted wide-ranging reform of Irish education. Titley argues that the Hierarchy became nervous of this, seeing it as an attempted state takeover of their interests and organised the people to strongly resist state control. In so doing they saw the emergent nationalism and Gaelic Ireland movements as useful to their cause. "The Church backed the winning horse," says Titley. Macpherson's plans were wrecked.

Titley sees Sinn Fein as a conservative force, willing to accept church rulings on educational matters, particularly de Valera. The first Dail appointed no Minister of Education, lest the state be seen to interfere

with church control. Educational matters were dealt with under Aireacht na Gaedhige. In 1922, the Gaelic scholar Eoin MacNeill became the first Minister for Education in the Free State. A brilliant scholar, he was a poor administrator and never challenged the church's claim to control. He was moreover deeply influenced by the enormously powerful figure of Rev. Professor Timothy Corcoran S.J., Professor of Education at U.C.D. and also a lover of Irish. Corcoran propounded educational ideas of the narrowest and most traditional kind. He was a lover of the classics, a proponent of stern corporal discipline, a fierce opponent of Froebel and Montessori methods.

Throughout the coming decades, the revival of Irish language in the schools went hand in hand with entrenchment of religious control over the Irish state system of education. The equation of Irish with Catholic and Gaelic received institutional expression. Here Titley is at his most polemical. He attacks the attempt to revive Irish through the schools as a "ritual of linguistic necromancy." He claims that the bishops supported Irish because they saw it as less immoral than English, citing a 1925 pronouncement of Archbishop O'Donnell of Armagh on this matter. He claims that Pearse's school, St. Enda's, was "sectarian and segregated by sex," and that Pearse in the long run agreed with the church. Vocational and technical education were allowed to develop only in so far as they did not threaten church interests in the secondary schools. All through the 30s and 40s state developments in education ceded power and control to the church. When teacher training became more and more restricted for lay men and women after 1934, Carysfort was doubling its hostel for nuns training as teachers. Thus state cutbacks in education increased the number of religious in teaching.

The end result was a nation which put educational aims behind moral and religious aims, for Titley a "spiritual empire" was created with Ireland exporting religious abroad to the missions. The principal function of

the Irish school system became the production of clergy.

Clearly this is a provocative book, vigorously against Catholic control over education. However as a critical analysis its value is limited. Titley likes to keep his thesis simple, and shows little understanding of the complexities of Irish history, or the complicated relation of the people to their priests. He ignores the strong interest of Protestant authorities in denominational education; institutional duplication has been a safeguard to pluralism in Ireland as Micheal MacGreill has argued in *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland*. Moreover state interests could often become Protestant interests; the Protestant Archbishop Whateley saw the National school system of the 19th century as "the only hope of weaning the Irish from the abuses of popery." Whateley was a long serving member of the National Schools Commission.

Titley misunderstands the relationship of the bishops to the Irish language before Independence. The relationship was far from being supportive in most cases. One has only to read Padraig Pearse's account of the dismissal of Dr. O'Hickey from Maynooth to realise this. Furthermore, Titley's assessment of Pearse is out of tune with the facts. Far from being a sectarian bigot, he was in favour of multi-denominational non-discriminatory schooling and he was critical of church influence and control.

Titley sees Gaelic culture as backward and inward looking. He ignores the imperialist ideology of the state system before Independence. When he criticises the way Irish history was taught as propaganda in the Free State, he is ignoring the fact that the new nation had to create itself from a vacuum with its own myths and stories, a process of self-understanding which is as necessary as it is open to danger.

Titley never analyses his own presuppositions. For him state control is necessarily good. But his narrow focussing on the Free State leaves unassessed the manner in which state schools became Protestant schools in Northern Ireland during the same period. While the book is very readable, and useful for its facts and for portraits like that of Timothy Corcoran, it is unsatisfactory as a critique of Irish education. Church control of education in Ireland needs to be criticised, but it must be done in the light of all the denominations, so that the true nature of the pressures on the Irish educational system be understood.

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