

The British and Foreign School Society, Past and Present

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The British and Foreign School Society (hereafter BFSS)¹ occupies a substantial place not only in British educational history but also in the educational histories of many other parts of the world. Such prominence has been reflected in its historiography. For example, in 1987 George Bartle compiled a list of some 60 books, articles and unpublished typescripts produced since 1965 that contained information about the BFSS, its colleges and schools.² The great majority of these works were concerned with 'British' rather than 'Foreign'.³ Almost all dealt with the nineteenth century. Research into the nineteenth-century origins and nature of the BFSS continues. Thus both 'British' and 'Foreign' dimensions of the BFSS, with particular reference to the monitorial system and the early nineteenth century, have been re-examined in the light of modern theoretical analyses. For example, John Hassard and Michael Rowlinson have seized upon Michel Foucault's reference to the 'Lancaster method' in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) to research Foucault's research with reference to Lancasterian policies and philosophies and their implementation in 'British' schools.⁴ This brief article, however, eschews the in-depth approach and takes a longer perspective to show how the Society has adapted and changed over two centuries. It is divided into four sections: foundation; schools; colleges; charity.

Foundation

The BFSS was formed to carry on the work begun by the young Quaker, Joseph Lancaster,⁵ who established his day school just off the Borough Road, Southwark in 1798. In 1803 Lancaster's work became more widely known with the publication of the first of several editions of *Improvements in Education as it respects the industrious classes of the Community*. Lancaster's improvements included a non-sectarian Christian rather than denominational approach to religious teaching, the use of rewards as well as punishments, and a system of mutual and self-instruction that became known as the monitorial system. This was an era of patronage and over the next few years Lancaster acquired an impressive group of distinguished supporters, both lay and clerical, who subscribed money for his Borough Road School and for the production of more copies of *Improvements*. In 1805 he even secured annual subscriptions of £100 from

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King George III, £50 from Queen Charlotte and £25 from each of the five princesses. In spite of this support it soon became obvious that Lancaster's 'skill as a pioneer of monitorial teaching was only equalled by his incapacity in financial matters'.⁶ By 1807 Lancaster owed more than £3,000 and, pursued by creditors, was committed to the King's Bench debtors' prison.

In 1808 a committee of trustees was formed to take over Lancaster's debts, which now totalled some £5,000, and to manage his future financial affairs. Prominent members included William Allen, William Corston, Joseph Foster, Joseph Fox, John Jackson and Thomas Sturge. The committee subsequently took the title of the Royal Lancasterian Institution.⁷ In spite of the financial acumen and generosity of its members, 'the biggest problem which faced the trustees was the recklessness of Lancaster himself'.⁸ In 1814, the year in which the BFSS assumed its current name, matters came to a head when it became clear that Lancaster's financial misdemeanours were coupled with others of a more personal nature. Lancaster's position was now untenable and as H.B. Binns recorded in his centenary history of the BFSS:

... on April 16, 1814, he finally, in a petulant letter, severed all connection with the society he had created and declared his intention of forming a rival establishment. Had he not done so the relationship must have been severed by the society on grounds of moral delinquency.⁹

Schools

By 1833 the BFSS was sufficiently established to be one of only two societies¹⁰ to receive money for building schoolhouses from the parliamentary grant for education begun in that year. In 1845 the Society also accepted an annual maintenance grant for its training department at Borough Road. By 1816 there were some 275 BFSS schools in England and Wales. Finances, however, remained problematic and it has been argued that 'The British and Foreign School Society could scarcely have survived without the support of a few Whig magnates and radical industrialists'.¹¹ General subscriptions declined as original patrons passed away and new donors could not be found. Nevertheless the Education Census of 1851 recorded 514 British schools while in 1861 the Report of the Newcastle Commission showed that numbers of British weekday elementary schools or departments in England and Wales had risen to 1,131. These were attended by 89,843 boys and 61,162 girls. While these figures were dwarfed by those of the Church of England with some 19,549 schools or departments, the average British school contained twice as many pupils. The Society was also comfortably ahead of those of the next most populous organizations, the Roman Catholics with 743 and Wesleysans with 445 schools.¹²

It is impossible to give precise figures as to the numbers of British schools in other countries. Most European countries experimented with the monitorial system, which found particular favour in Denmark, Sweden and Ireland. It also flourished in Russia following a visit to Borough Road in 1814 by Tsar Alexander I. The system was spread by missionaries as well as teachers, and by the despatch of manuals and lesson sheets all over the world.¹³ 'Lessons were translated into French, German, Russian, Spanish, Greek, Italian, several Indian languages and Chinese'.¹⁴ Countries mentioned in BFSS annual reports as having schools on the British system included eight in South America, nine in Africa, ten in Asia, and 12 in Central America. The system reached Australia and Tasmania, while 'There were British Schools in all

the large towns and cities in New England and Canada and Joseph Lancaster spent most of the last thirty years of his life there.¹⁵ Indeed in October 1838 Lancaster met a painful and untimely end when knocked down by a horse-drawn vehicle in New York.

One of Lancaster's main principles, adhered to by the BFSS in principle if not always in practice, was that religious teaching in its schools should be unsectarian. Teachers could provide explanations of passages in the Bible but there was to be no teaching of any catechism or particular denominational tenets. Clause 14 of the Elementary Education Act of 1870 stated that in the new rate-aided board schools 'No religious catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any particular denomination shall be taught in the school.'¹⁶ W.E. Forster, the author of the Act, acknowledged the Society's influence when he announced to the House of Commons that:

... the local boards would establish schools very much upon the system of the British and Foreign School Society. It is upon this principle that schools are established by Englishmen, when they meet together as Englishmen, and not as members of a particular sect.¹⁷

A recent meticulous study by Geoffrey Chorley, however, has pointed out two major differences between the 'unsectarian' interpretations of the BFSS and the 1870 Act.¹⁸ The first was that the BFSS had required its scholars to attend a place of worship on Sunday whereas the Act did not; the second that while the BFSS required any oral interpretation of the Bible by the teacher to be unsectarian, the 1870 Act made no such stipulation. Nevertheless, the Society's journal concluded that 'the new Education Act is as favourable to the principles of the British and Foreign School Society as could well be expected'.¹⁹ This was confirmed in 1881 when it was claimed that 'School boards are in reality British School Committees, some upon a gigantic scale, and with a few exceptions the schools are British schools with another name'.²⁰ A further conjunction was apparent when Forster became BFSS Vice President in 1874 and President in 1883. Although in 1897 there were still more than 1,000 British schools in existence, 755 had been handed over to the school boards.²¹ This process would continue into the twentieth century, in spite of the replacement of the school boards by local education authorities under the Education Act of 1902. Although the BFSS initially spent much time in securing conditions for its schools consistent with religious liberties and existing trusts, 'Gradually a large number of these voluntary "non-provided" schools passed over into the category of council or "provided" schools.'²²

Colleges

The year 1870, however, marked not so much a retreat as a redirection. In 1871 the Society 'announced that in future their resources would be devoted to teacher-training rather than to schools'.²³

One of the most distinctive elements at Borough Road School was that Lancaster assumed responsibility for the training of senior pupils and young men in his teaching methods. These older boys lived with him in a 'Family' as 'House Lads'. With the establishment of a girls' school under the superintendence of Lancaster's older sister, Mary, the need to train female teachers also became apparent. By 1812 the 'Family' consisted of John Pickton, then master at Borough Road and his wife, Isaac

Walters, the clerk to the Committee, Ann Springman, referred to as the matron, five other women, 24 youths from England, 16 from Ireland, two from Africa and one from Denmark.²⁴ Although in its early days Borough Road was essentially a school to which a training facility was attached, it may be counted as the first teacher training college in England. The BFSS Annual Report for 1814 declared that it would:

Support and train up young persons of both sexes for supplying properly instructed Teachers to the inhabitants of such places in the British dominions, at home and abroad, as shall be desirous of establishing schools on the British system. It shall instruct all persons, whether natives or foreigners, who may be sent from time to time, for the purpose of being qualified as teachers in this or any other country.²⁵

Major figures in the early years of training were Pickton, his successor as master John Crossley, and Henry Dunn who in 1830 was appointed secretary to the BFSS. In 1840 Dunn and Crossley produced a notable series of graduated *Lessons Books* which provided lessons for every day of the school year and were widely used in British schools and elsewhere.²⁶

Although female students had been admitted to train at Borough Road from the early days, their attendance appears to have been intermittent until an adequate Normal School building was opened in 1817. Thereafter they continued to experience inferior accommodation to the men and were fewer in numbers. George Bartle has concluded that ‘the Society, like other educational bodies at this period, was less concerned with the quality of its women teachers – and its girls schools – than with the selection and training of suitable men’.²⁷ Ann Springman, who had served as monitor and apprentice teacher at the Borough Road girls’ school, was the major figure in the early years. In 1827 she married Kenneth Macrae, another former apprentice who was for a while superintendent of British schools in Scotland. Following his death in 1852, she returned to Southwark as superintendent of the girls’ school and women’s training institution in Martin Street, retiring in 1861 with a government pension in recognition of her work.²⁸ In the same year the women’s department from Borough Road was transmuted into Stockwell College in south-west London in buildings formally opened by Lord John Russell.²⁹ Early in the twentieth century new premises were acquired at the Old Palace in Bromley.

Borough Road College was not only the first teacher training college in England, it was also the foremost. New buildings were erected in 1842 and in 1890 the college moved to a spacious new site at Isleworth. By 1893 more than a third of Borough Road students were preparing for university degrees. A radical change in staffing policy occurred as young tutors with academic and sporting prowess were recruited on short-term contracts from Cambridge and Oxford.

This policy hastened the transformation of Borough Road at Isleworth from a prototype of the Victorian residential training college into an institution not unlike a Victorian public school, with a premium on examination successes, a prefectorial system and a strong emphasis on games and physical fitness...every afternoon was devoted to compulsory games on the extensive playing fields at Isleworth...and all staff, apart from vice-Principal Barkby, were expected to participate personally in games.³⁰

Many more teachers would be required in the wake of the 1870 Act and by 1884 the Society could boast six colleges, training some 15 per cent of intending teachers.³¹ Bangor Normal College had been founded in 1858 as a result of the joint efforts

of the BFSS, Sir Hugh Owen and the local community. It moved into permanent premises in 1862.³² Borough Road, Stockwell and Bangor were now complemented by three new foundations. Swansea began in 1872 in premises formerly occupied by the Brecon Normal College which had transferred to Swansea in 1849.³³ The generosity of the Pease family was crucial in aiding the BFSS to establish its first college in the north of the country, originally in 1872 but in new premises at Vane Terrace, Darlington from 1876.³⁴ Saffron Walden was founded in 1884 to train infant teachers along kindergarten lines.³⁵

The later 1960s saw the beginning of a remarkable expansion in teacher education. Within a mere seven years numbers of students in training more than doubled while academic aspirations were raised with the introduction of the B.Ed. degree. This increase, however, coincided with a decline in the birth rate, from a peak of 870,000 in 1964 to a mere 602,000 in 1975.³⁶ This led to an oversupply of teachers and the system went into sharp reverse as central governments decided how best to reduce teacher training places from 114,000 to 46,000 within eight years.³⁷ This process took place within the context of a major reorganization of higher education. Large, multipurpose, urban institutions were favoured; small, rural colleges solely devoted to training teachers were at risk.³⁸

David Hencke selected Darlington, as a college forced to close, as one of four case studies for his classic study, *Colleges in Crisis*.³⁹ The College was the only institution concerned solely with higher education in Darlington, a town with a population of some 86,000 people. It specialized in the provision of nursery teachers but general provision was also made for those training for infant and junior schools with three courses in biology, maths and physical education at secondary. By the early 1970s student numbers had grown, but only to 450, below the minimum of 600 that would later be required. Academic entry standards were low, with only some 20 per cent of students with two GCE A levels as against a national college average of 40 per cent, and it soon became clear that the College's future as an independent institution was under severe threat. Darlington's freedom to merge with another institution or institutions, however, was severely hampered by the fact that any 'arrangements would have to satisfy five different bodies – the Department, the BFSS, the Charity Commissioners, the Durham local education authority and the college itself – all of which looked at the problems from different angles'.⁴⁰ In spite of a well-argued document, *Darlington College of Education: The Case for Survival*, and a delegation to the minister, Darlington was one of more than 40 colleges of education forced to close its doors.

None of the Society's colleges survived intact. Three closed completely: Saffron Walden in 1977, Darlington in 1978 and Stockwell, which in 1960 had become an LEA college under the control of Kent, in 1980. The others were absorbed into larger institutions of higher education. Thus in 1976 Borough Road was merged with Maria Grey College and the advanced work of Chiswick Polytechnic to form the West London Institute. Between 1995 and 2006 it served as the Osterley Campus of Brunel University. In 2006 the site was sold. Bangor pursued a similar course and finally in 1996 became part of the University of Bangor. Swansea, which in 1913 had become an LEA college, followed suit, merging with the School of Arts and Crafts and Swansea Technical College in 1972 to form the West Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education. In 1992 this was transmuted into the Swansea Institute of Higher Education and in 2008 into Swansea Metropolitan University.

Charity

By 1980, its schools and colleges gone, the BFSS might have seemed at the end of the road. Once more, however, the Society reinvented itself. In 1906 the BFSS had been formally recognized as a charity by Royal Charter.⁴¹ College closures enabled the BFSS to acquire capital, the most recent some £5 million for the sale of the remaining land and premises at Saffron Walden in 2010, that is now used to make grants of some £500,000 per year. The BFSS Governing Council is composed of a minimum of 12 Trustees with three main subsidiary committees: executive, grants, investments. The Society's principal officers are currently Rt Hon David Lammy MP (President), Roger Howarth (Chair) and Imogen Wilde (Director).⁴²

The Society's current strapline is 'Maximising Educational Opportunity for All'. Although the BFSS is still based in Britain, in terms of grants the 'Foreign' dimension is now greater than the 'British'. Thus in 2011 the Society funded projects in 21 overseas countries although these are channelled through UK-registered charities. For example, in 2009-10 grants totalling £12,500 were made to Children in Crisis for their Community Education Project in Afghanistan. The BFSS's grant supported the establishment of four centres in and around Kabul that provided accelerated learning classes for 265 children, including 204 girls, education support for a further 640 children, and literacy and tailoring classes for more than 300 women. Another major example was a grant of £12,500 in 2011-12 to The British Asian Trust, founded in 2009 by HRH The Prince of Wales. This enabled the Trust, through its charity partner, Developments in Literacy (DIL), to provide online training for teachers in Pakistan. African grants in 2011 included £10,000 to construct a permanent school building in Kaningo, Sierra Leone, £11,899 to furnish and resource a school in an urban slum district in Mombasa, Kenya, £16,500 to help build a centre for orphans in Changarawe, Tanzania and £56,522 to refit classrooms in six primary schools in Kwahu-Tafo, Ghana and equip them with computers.⁴³

One of the major iniquities of UK society is the very small proportion of children from poorer backgrounds who go to university or enter the professions. IntoUniversity, a charity piloted in north London in 2002 and launched in 2007, aims to establish a network of centres to provide 7-18 year olds with a combination of after-school academic support, undergraduate mentors and specially-designed study weeks.⁴⁴ In 2011-12 the BFSS gave a two-year grant of £30,000 to its Haringey Centre. Even closer to home was the two-year grant totalling £32,640 given to Brunel University for its Urban Studies programme which supports able youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds in 30 schools across nine local authorities in inner London. In June 2012, graduates from this programme were awarded certificates at Brunel by Professor Steve Hodgkinson, former Pro Vice-Chancellor at Brunel and currently Chair of the BFSS Grants Committee.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The British and Foreign School Society was founded in 1814 to continue the educational work begun by Joseph Lancaster at Borough Road. As Joyce Taylor has concluded, 'Though it is easy to over-estimate the influence of the British and Foreign School Society, it was the only society of its kind working, world-wide, to establish universal education on non-sectarian lines.'⁴⁶ Major changes have occurred in its pri-

orities. The initial focus was on schools, from 1870 on teacher training and currently on making grants. British dimensions were uppermost for most of this period; now the focus is on foreign projects. Although begun in a situation of debt and frequently in straitened circumstances, the Society now enjoys considerable assets. But though there have been changes, continuities are also clear. Throughout its 200-year history the Society has remained true to its purpose of spreading education and enlightenment, particularly to those in deprived situations, both at home and overseas.

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