

# McCann, Philip

---

## The Origin and Growth of the Infant School in Britain 1816-1850

---

Rozprawy z Dziejów Oświaty 25, 155-165

---

1983

Artykuł umieszczony jest w kolekcji cyfrowej Bazhum, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych tworzonej przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego.

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie ze środków specjalnych MNiSW dzięki Wydziałowi Historycznemu Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.



PHILIP McCANN

## THE ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE INFANT SCHOOL IN BRITAIN 1816—1850

“Something like a new era in the history of English Education began when infant schools were introduced”, wrote the Christian Socialist F. D. Maurice in 1839, “because the founders of these spoke well about the impossibility of dealing with infants as machines and declared that their great intention was to call forth the life of the child”. The beginning of infant education can be dated precisely to 1 January 1816, when Robert Owen opened his school at New Lanark, Scotland. Three years later a second school was opened in London and from then on infant schools multiplied rapidly, spreading across the whole of the British Isles during the 1820’s and 30’s. Few innovations in British educational history have been as pedagogically important or have had such a long history; infant schools of the early nineteenth century anticipated many of the methods associated with modern “progressive” education and can be seen as the fountain-head of the tradition which survived to flower in the much-admired British primary schools of today.

In one sense the infant school was part of the great movement for the education of the poor by the middle and upper classes which swept Britain in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and which, from 1800 onwards, replaced the formal and informal methods of education of the eighteenth century—charity schools and apprenticeship—by the monitorial school. A system for the mass production of literacy, the monitorial system overcame the teacher shortage by crowding up to five-hundred children from 6 to 12 years into one school room under the superintendence of one adult, who utilized a corps of child monitors to teach small groups of children by rote in a strictly graded manner. It was this method of dealing with children as machines that Maurice felt had been superseded by the infant school. Few schools of the nineteenth century embodied a greater number of innovations. The infant school catered to the hitherto-neglected age group of two to six years; it largely dispensed with formal lessons, the rigid seating arrangements and strict time-tables that had been standard features of schools since time

immemorial; it substituted amusement, interest and activity for the conning of alphabets, spelling books and religious texts; above all, it was based on the assumption that the period of early childhood was a crucially important phase in human development.

The early history of infant schools falls into five phases: the beginnings at New Lanark in 1816; the transplantation to England in 1819, and the development of the "English" infant school; the organization of the Infant School Society, which lasted from 1824 to 1828; the work of Samuel Wilderspin as an educational missionary in the late 1820's and early 1830's; and the reorganization of the infant school movement under the Home and Colonial School Society from 1836 onwards.

The formal education of children under six by middle-class philanthropists began in the dawn of the industrial revolution, when David Dale opened a cotton mill at New Lanark in 1785. The machines were largely attended by pauper apprentices and Dale was considered exceptionally benevolent in organizing good living conditions for the apprentices and by providing those too young to work (i.e., the children under six) with a rudimentary form of education. Robert Owen married Dale's daughter, took over management of the mills in 1800 and immediately began to make further improvements in the social conditions and social welfare of his workers and their children; in these plans the infant school, part of a complex of educational institutions, played a crucial role.

Owen's educational schemes were founded on a humane and revolutionary theory of society. His philosophy was a synthesis of ideas derived from millenarianism, philanthropy, socialism and communitarianism, whose frame of reference was the eighteenth century Enlightenment and he envisaged the transformation of society by means of self-supporting agricultural villages run on communitarian lines. In Owen's science of society, man's character would be transformed in accordance with the doctrine of circumstance, the belief that "any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened", may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by the application of proper means, more often expressed in the slogan "man's character is formed for him, not by him".

Owen's great innovation was to apply the ideals of Enlightenment educational theory—commitment to human happiness, the fostering of kindness, the belief in the basic goodness and educability of children, the view that knowledge was obtained via the senses—to the education of the children of factory workers. The children of the working class, he declared, should have not only the best manner but also the best matter of instruction. To facilitate this he took the unprecedented step of refusing to employ in his mills any child under ten years of age, breaking with the universal practice of putting children to work at six

years of age. He selected as a teacher for the infant school James Buchanan, a former weaver, who quickly proved to have a natural aptitude for dealing with young children. Buchanan led the infants in dances to the flute, told them stories in a simple manner, taught arithmetic and other subjects by means of rhyme, and improved their observation and perception by the introduction of objects of nature. Buchanan's spontaneity, sense of invention and avoidance of authoritarian rote learning produced an atmosphere totally different from that in dame schools or indeed in any other contemporary schools for the poor. Buchanan's free methods were too much even for Owen, who felt that his mode of teaching was insufficiently rational and organized.

Nevertheless, the infant school became the great attraction at New Lanark. Among the visitors were several members of the reform wing of the Whig party, including John Smith and Lord Lansdowne. They communicated their admiration to Henry Brougham, the Whig spokesman on education, who in turn contacted Owen and made plans to set up an infant school in London. Brougham's associates included James Mill, Bentham's Utilitarian disciple, and various Dissenters, Evangelicals, radicals and friends of Owen, and in February 1819 they founded the first "English" infant school at Brewer's Green, Westminster, and installed James Buchanan as master.

Brougham and his associates admired Owen's "plan", but rejected his "theory". Their ideology, derived from the theories of Malthus, Bentham and Chalmers, stressed the need to educate the children of the poor as to their "true interests" and to use education as an antidote to crime, juvenile delinquency and radical-revolutionary ideas. In a larger context they recognized that the spread of industrialisation and the rapid growth of towns had disorganized the old patterns of family life and argued that public institutions for the care of young children were necessary. Had they organized Westminster Infant School strictly in accordance with their social theories, it might have become an asylum for the social control of the wild-running children of the metropolis. The logic of events, however, compelled them to follow the successful precedent at New Lanark; James Buchanan, no more amenable to Brougham's direction than to Owen's, merely carried on at London where he had left off in Scotland. Visitors' accounts show little difference in the methods and practices of the two schools.

Buchanan also took the momentous step of joining the St. George's Fields congregation of the New Church, which based itself on the theological doctrines of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. At this congregation he met Samuel Wilderspin, who was destined to play a crucial role in the development of the infant school. Wilderspin, born in 1791, had been brought up as a Swedenborgian; his father Alexander had been one of the earliest members of the first New Church congre-

gation established in London in 1788. Wilderspin's Swedenborgian background helped to distance him from the outlook of both the Broughamites and the supporters of Church and State. In addition he was aided by personal instruction from both Buchanan and Owen; the latter considered him an apt pupil of the Owenite method, which was somewhat more formal than that of Buchanan. Despite Owen's later criticisms, Wilderspin's system of infant education was in direct line of descent from the New Lanark original.

The hallmarks of Wilderspin's school were activity in the playground (provided with swings and toys) and the classroom; short and simple lessons in the basic subjects, natural history and geography; music, singing and dancing; teaching with the aid of tangible objects; and non-denominational religious instruction with the aid of columned pictures of Biblical history. In practice he differed from Owen in two respects: he believed in minor corporal punishment ("a pat on the hand with a twig") for disobedience, lying and stealing. In addition (following Buchanan) he made greater use of the chanting and singing of rhymes, arithmetical tables and similar matter as a basic method of teaching.

Wilderspin and his friend David Goyder, a fellow Swedenborgian who established the third English infant school at Bristol in 1821, on lines similar to those of Westminster and Spitalfields, travelled about the country in the early 1820's at the request of sponsors, setting up schools on the model of their own. By 1824 there were some twenty-five or thirty infant schools established, mainly in the Midlands and the South of England, and it was possible to talk of a movement in favour of the new institutions. This movement attracted an unusually large number of "outsiders". At least seven of the first thirty or so teachers were Swedenborgians, and among supporters and publicists were Evangelicals (at this period still regarded as subversive by the High Church), Quakers, Unitarians, Seventh Day Adventists, and millennarians of various kinds, many of whom were also followers of the Swiss educational reformer Pestalozzi.

J. F. C. Harrison has called members of these sects "spiritual entrepreneurs", individuals who were dissatisfied with orthodox beliefs and were eager to sample new ideologies, new religions and different life-styles. James Pierpoint Greaves, who later became secretary of the Infant School Society, and who embraced Swedenborgianism, Pestalozzianism and Owenism, and practised vegetarianism and the simple life, was a typical example; David Goyder, who began as Anglican, turned successively to Swedenborgianism, Phrenology, and Pestalozzianism and ended up as a Mason, was another. Something like an alternative culture swirled about the early infant school movement, giving it an ambience quite different from that which surrounded the new monitorial schools.

This did not, however, necessarily endear the new schools to the class for which they were intended—the labouring poor. The more skilled and better-paid artisans had, since the eighteenth century, supported schools of their own, with teachers drawn from their own class—dame schools for children under six and common day schools for older children. Dame schools were at least as numerous as infant schools, in many areas more numerous. There was a tendency among their supporters to regard the free or cheap infant schools as akin to a form of middle class charity and to condemn activity and amusement as mere play which interfered with the learning of “letters”. In the 1820’s, at least, the new schools met with a form of passive resistance from the upper ranks of the working class.

The undirected and somewhat chaotic growth of the schools in the first five years of their existence induced Brougham and his associates to give the movement an organizational basis. In June 1824 they organized the Infant School Society, on the model of the Anglican National Society and the mainly Nonconformist British Society. The committee, which included several of those who had founded Westminster Infant School, consisted mainly of the London financial and merchant bourgeoisie, mostly Evangelical or Nonconformist in outlook and Whig in politics, with few ties with the land-owning aristocracy, the Church or the Universities. They were prepared to tolerate the unorthodox and appointed J. P. Greaves as secretary of the Society. They issued an Address on infant education which, though it made some concession to the role of the infant school as a custodial institution designed to civilize the children of the poor, also gave much space to the Owen-Wilderspin concepts of the importance of early education, the need for kind and able teachers, a wide curriculum, short lessons, playground exercise and creative activity. A Central Model Infant School for training teachers was also proposed.

The Society appointed Wilderspin as a travelling agent who would go into the country to organize and open infant schools at the request of philanthropic groups or individuals. Relinquishing his post at Spitalfields early in 1825, after the death of his first wife, Wilderspin began his work in the rural counties around London, then in the industrial towns and seaports of the Midlands and the North. In the twelve months following June 1824 some sixty infant schools were established, inspired by the Society, but not all founded by Wilderspin. As the new infant schools spread across the country, Anglican and Tory opinion, particularly at the parish level, turned against them. Infant schools (together with Mechanics’ Institutes) were seen as part of a plot by Brougham and his associates to spread the doctrines of science, rationalism and utilitarianism, and to undermine the safety of Church and State. The relatively large number of Swedenborgians, Pestalozzians, Dissenters and ra-

dicals associated with the movement was seen as adding weight to the argument. The Infant School Society became the target for repeated calumnies, but instead of fighting back it weakly succumbed. Brougham withdrew from active participation, and the Evangelicals on the committee, moving towards a more conservative and pro-Church position, took over the direction of the Society. At the general meeting in 1827 they dismissed Greaves from the secretaryship and shortly afterwards expelled from the committee Dr. George Birkbeck, a founder of the Mechanics' Institutes, together with several other supporters of popular education. The Society lasted only another year then quickly expired, its Model School unbuilt.

The demise of the Society might have marked the end of the movement for independent, non-denominational and progressive infant schools but for one man, Samuel Wilderspin, who carried on as independent "missionary" for infant education after 1828. Wilderspin moved to Cheltenham in the first months of 1829, set up a depot for classroom apparatus there and began a career of an independent educational entrepreneur. This was not difficult because he was, at the time, in the midst of a two-year sojourn in Scotland, laying the foundations of an indigenous infant school movement. He had been invited to Glasgow in the spring of 1828 by David Stow, an Evangelical silk-merchant, and had helped him to open the second infant school in Scotland. The school had many features of the Owen-Buchanan-Wilderspin model; the religious instruction, however, was strongly scriptural on approved Evangelical lines. From Glasgow Wilderspin went to Edinburgh at the invitation of George Combe, the foremost phrenologist of his time and a strong advocate of secular, scientific education taught on principles derived from phrenology. Phrenology, in its popular form, claimed to be able to assess the characteristics of the mind by the configuration of the skull, but the founders of the movement in Scotland, Combe and James Simpson, were also "progressive" educationists, advocating a system of education based on common or comprehensive schools and an encyclopaedic curriculum. They supported infant schools because they believed that they provided an education in harmony with the developing faculties of the child.

After organizing the palatial and successful Edinburgh Infant School for Combe and Simpson, Wilderspin set out an extended tour of Scotland, occasionally interrupted by forays into England and Wales. From 1829 onwards he had, of course, to rely on publicity in order to make a living, and in his last year in Scotland he devised a style of work which, though it brought him fame, was ultimately to have an adverse effect on the infant school movement. On arriving at a town he would advertise a meeting, give a lecture or series of lectures, help to organize a school, then remain four or five weeks to train the teacher and

instruct the children. At the opening of the school or shortly afterwards he would march the children, carrying flowers or branches, through the streets to a public hall where he would hold an "exhibition" of the children's talents in answering questions on general knowledge or the 3 R's, and in singing, making arm movements and generally behaving in a decorous and disciplined fashion. If the school had been opened before his arrival he would conduct a public "examination" in a similar manner.

Wilderspin continued in this way from 1829 to 1836, covering all corners of the British Isles and scarcely ever being out of work. Without his efforts the infant school movement might have foundered. By 1836 he estimated that over 270 schools were in operation, many of them founded by himself. During this time he had been refining the theoretical basis of his work, synthesizing strands of thought derived from three sources: Emanuel Swedenborg, Heinrich Pestalozzi, and the phrenologists. From Swedenborg (1688—1772), the Swedish polymath who had proclaimed that the millennium had begun in 1757, inaugurating a new Church and a new revelation, and whose extensive writings embraced educational theory, Wilderspin accepted several basic pedagogical propositions. First, that young children were basically innocent; here Swedenborg was at one with Rousseau, Pestalozzi and others, though he regarded this innocence not as natural but as "a gift from the Lord". Second, that infants were endowed with both curiosity and the love of knowledge; the role of the teacher was to foster these characteristics and encourage a child to think for himself. Third, that the child had no innate ideas but gained knowledge via sensory impressions of the material world. Fourth, that education proceeded in stages: Infancy, the most important stage of all; childhood and youth, when natural knowledge was absorbed via a wide curriculum; and adulthood, when "interior spiritual instruction" was revealed from the truth of the Holy Word. These views, as the New Church did not hesitate to point out, were not dissimilar from those of Pestalozzi nor, for that matter, those of Owen. With these ideas as a basis, Wilderspin found little difficulty in accepting such Pestalozzian principles as were known in Britain at the time—principally, the need for love as the basis of education, the necessity of harmonising teaching with the child's natural development, the importance of developing a child's perception by means of natural objects. To these he added, from phrenology, the desirability of developing each faculty in turn, the importance of a wide curriculum and the crucial role of health and exercise.

From these materials (all of which had a common source in the Enlightenment) and on the basis of his own experiments and experiences, Wilderspin constructed a theory of infant education which was far in advance of his time.



In his mature writings and speeches Wilderspin divided education, as did Pestalozzi and the phrenologists, into Intellectual, Moral and Physical aspects. With regard to physical education he argued that exercise, cleanliness, orderliness and pleasant occupation were primary requisites of education for the children of the poor. Furthermore he incorporated the child's natural liveliness and desire for activity into the learning process, providing frequent periods of exercise in the playground and teaching arithmetic and other subject with the aid of games, movement, hand clapping, arm movements and so on. Wilderspin considered a playground an indispensable part of an infant school and was primarily responsible for its incorporation into the school life of young children.

Wilderspin's concept of moral education, though he regarded it as the most important aspect of his work, was probably the weakest aspect of his pedagogy. His teaching in this area had more in common with the religious moralizing of the period than with Owen's formation of rational character. Wilderspin saw morality in terms of discrete, New Testament, virtues — truthfulness, honesty, obedience, benevolence, et.— and it was the business of the infant school to inculcate these and to drive out or keep at bay selfishness, dishonesty, viciousness and similar vices. His sole originality lay in using the playground as a moral laboratory, continually observing the children at play and allowing no untoward incident to pass without investigation and adjustment by means of a child jury.

With regard to intellectual education, Wilderspin advocated a curriculum of the 3 R's, geography, natural history, a knowledge of everyday things, and some knowledge of "the leading facts of the New Testament"; taught by pictures; music was used to stimulate the spirits, calm the passions and to make lessons more enjoyable. Though accused by later critics of giving too much time to memory work, Wilderspin in his theory at least, postulated a four-stage learning process in a manner redolent of Pestalozzi. The role of the teacher was, first, to foster the inquisitive spirit in infants; second, to direct it to objects suited to the infant faculties; third, to allow the senses of the children to ascertain the nature and properties of the objects; fourth, to get the children to put into words the ideas excited by each object. He pointed out, however, that these were general formulations and that children learned in their own way at different rates; getting the children to think for themselves, he insisted, was the fundamental principle of his system.

Wilderspin's strength was to recognize the importance of, and the connection between, theory and practice in education. His weakness was his inability to harmonize consistently his practice with his theoretical conceptions. He invented, or perfected, an "arithmeticon" (a spe-

cies of ball frame) for teaching arithmetic, and a "gonigraph" or jointed stick for illustrating geometrical forms; but having invented them in his early years of teaching, he tried to yoke them to his later theory, rather than scrapping them or redesigning them on the basis of his later insights. In the teaching of grammar, geography, natural history and to some extent mathematics the practice, however, followed from the theory. But the average teacher would be easily attracted to the weakest aspects of the practice—the chanting of tables, the ingestion of inert knowledge by question and answer and singing and movement merely for the sake of diversion. Only the most persistent and able teachers would be able to devise, by their own efforts, a consistent set of practices from the relatively sophisticated theory to be found in, for instance, his *Infant Education of 1834* which, despite its weaknesses, was one of the most forward-looking and creative educational texts of the early nineteenth century.

The main characteristics of the Wilderspin model of the infant school in the mid-1830's were as follows: a large schoolroom with a gallery at one end, benches and lesson posts in the middle and a small classroom for group work opening off it; a playground equipped with see-saws and swings and planted with trees and shrubs; a wide curriculum; an abundance of apparatus—the arithmeticon, the gonigraph, natural objects of all kinds, coloured pictures, lesson cards, maps, globes, etc.; a flexible form of organization, with short and varied lessons, frequent breaks in the playground, and much music, dancing, marching and singing; no rewards of any kind, a minimum of corporal punishment and a jury system for settling disputes.

Much of this appears exceedingly "modern". In the 1830's perhaps only the well-supported schools in the larger cities could hope to incorporate all these characteristics. In fact, by the mid-30's, educationists sympathetic to the system, including Wilderspin himself, were unanimous that many, if not the majority, of infant schools were failing to do this and were mere caricatures of the Wilderspin model at its best. Exercise and amusement had been virtually abandoned, many schools lacked playgrounds, rote learning had invaded the teaching of all subjects and teachers put on incessant exhibitions of singing and other accomplishments in order to impress visitors and managers. In Wilderspin's words, the spirit of his system was neglected and only the mechanical parts retained.

There were several reasons for this. First, the rapid spread of the system exposed the inexperience of many managers and sponsors and their inability to raise funds with sufficient speed to meet the needs of their schools. Second, the failure of the Infant School Society to establish a Central Model School for the instruction of teachers. Third, the deficiencies of Wilderspin's five- or six-week training period. Fourth,

the weaknesses of Wilderspin's theory, which allowed easy but pedagogically dubious practices—chanting by rote, for instance—to emerge as an open invitation to uneducated or badly-trained teachers. The lack of quality among teachers was the crux of the matter. Managers, in an attempt to economise when subscriptions fell off, would engage uneducated girls or widows at starvation wages rather than a mature man and his wife as had been the custom in the early 1820's. A contributory cause of the crises was the rapid growth of infant schools under the sponsorship of the new generation of Evangelicals, more conservative, more "Protestant" and more insistent on Scriptural education than their forebears of the 1820's; this resulted in a move away from the teaching of natural history and geography by means of objects and pictures towards the rote learning of lists of Biblical facts.

It was, however, the Evangelicals and not Wilderspin who were to attempt to solve the crisis. In February, 1836 the Home and Colonial Infant School Society was formed by a group of Evangelical clergy and professional men; its aim was "the improvement and extension of the Infant School system on Christian Principles", by means of the training (and retraining) of teachers in a central model school for service in both Britain and the Colonies. Publicly the Society presented the image of militant Evangelicalism; speaker after speaker at its public meetings reiterated the view that "biblical truth" was at all times to be preferred to the "accumulation of knowledge", a position that isolated it from liberal educational opinion and, more seriously, from the Anglican Church, and gravely affected its finances. Not until 1841 did it alter its constitution to define Christian principles as those embodied in the doctrinal articles of the Church of England. After this Anglican support increased and a favourable reports were given by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools.

The Society's pedagogical position was very different from the Evangelicalism of its public face. Two of its main supporters were Dr. Charles Mayo and his sister Elizabeth, both convinced Pestalozzians, the former having taught at Yverdon from 1819 to 1822. They took over much of the pedagogical direction of the Society following the opening of a Model School in London in October, 1837. The publications of the Mayos on behalf of the Society were infused with Pestalozzi's ideas very much on the lines of Wilderspin's interpretation, though the Society placed a complete ban on any mention of the latter's name or achievements. Education was divided into Religious, Moral, Intellectual and Physical aspects, and a system closely resembling Wilderspin's advocated: lessons on objects and toys, the use of coloured pictures, instruction in human physiology, natural history, form and colour, number (with the aid of a ball frame), geography and drawing; gallery work, monitorial teaching, marching and exercise in the playground was also

included. On the other hand, religious instruction (including some learning of Biblical facts) was given primary place in the curriculum and taught in a devout manner with a solemn voice. Crude "patriotic" and conservative propaganda, aimed at Chartism and Owenism, was included in the curriculum; in this way the Society hoped to cut all ties with the liberal-populist tradition of Owen, Buchanan, Wilderspin, Goyder, Greaves and Simpson.

The Society, however, made innovations which were to have a lasting impact on infant education and on education in general. The period of training was increased from Wilderspin's six weeks to six months and the training course divided into academic work, the theory of education and teaching practice in schools, a division which has lasted to the present day. It also founded a Juvenile Model School in which infant school practices were introduced into schools for older children, a move anticipated by Wilderspin at both Liverpool and Dublin in the years 1836—1839.

The foundation of the Home and Colonial Infant School Society marked the beginning of the end of the era of individual philanthropy and entrepreneurship in infant education and the commencement of standardisation and central organisation. The relatively long period of training for all infant teachers gradually improved the teaching in the schools. In 1840 the infant school was indirectly recognized by the State when the Committee of Council on Education issued "Special Questions on Infant Schools" to its Inspectors. By mid-century, infant schools were being regularly inspected and many were receiving government grants as part of the national system. It was undoubtedly the Home and Colonial Society, in the 1840's more closely identified with the Anglican Church, which hastened this process. The history of the infant school in the second half of the nineteenth century largely concerns its position as an integral part of the state system<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the sources of the material in this paper, cf. P. McCann and F. A. Young, *Samuel Wilderspin and the Infant School Movement* (forthcoming).