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Education, Literacy and the Reading Public

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Various source media, British Library Newspapers



In considering the development and growth of the newspaper press in nineteenth-century Britain, it is important to keep in mind the question of audience. In 1800 around 40 percent of males and 60 percent of females in England and Wales were illiterate; by 1900 illiteracy for both sexes had dropped to around 3 percent. Thus, during the course of the century, there was an enormous expansion in the size of the reading public in Britain, giving new markets and audiences to publishers of books, periodicals and newspapers. This increase in literacy is, therefore, an important adjunct to the history of the nineteenth-century newspaper press, and this essay will explore how this increase was achieved.

Working-Class Education

Much of the rise in literacy was brought about through increases in the provision of schooling during the nineteenth century—especially for working-class children. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, education for the working classes was available on a haphazard basis in England and Wales. One of the primary providers of education was the churches, which ran Sunday schools and day schools. As all Sunday schools taught reading (so that children could read the Scriptures) and some also taught writing and even arithmetic, they were an important source of education for working-class children during this period. Growing in great numbers during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sunday schools were moreover well attended. In 1800 there were 2,000, with enrolment covering about 10 percent of children between the ages of five and eighteen; by 1851 there were 23,000 Sunday schools, with enrolment covering around 55 percent (2.4 million children). Indeed, by the mid nineteenth

century, it was estimated that as many as three-quarters of working-class children had attended a Sunday school at some point in their lives. The Church of England and the nonconformist churches also operated day schools—often called "voluntary" schools—with the non-denominational British and Foreign School Society being established in 1808 and the Church of England founding its National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in 1811; voluntary schools were also established by nonconformist denominations and Roman Catholics. There was also a growing number of private schools during this period. In these, there were great variations in quality of provision—from the "dame schools" which were often educationally worthless (many operating as a child-minding service) to very competent private schools for working-class children. Finally, education was also provided in a number of other settings, including some factories and Poor Law institutions.

However, as late as the 1850s, approximately half of all children in England and Wales attended no school (other than Sunday school). Day schools were not as popular as Sunday schools for working-class children, as they charged fees and operated during the week. Indeed, many working-class parents—especially unskilled workers—were forced through economic need to send their children to work, rather than to school. Moreover, as the average length of attendance was only around three years, even those children who did attend day schools probably did not achieve a high level of educational attainment.

The State only gradually became more involved in the provision of education during the nineteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, it was generally believed that education for the working classes was necessary, but there were arguments over how much should be provided, what should be taught (especially in terms of religion) and the role the government and the churches should play. Indeed, major divisions arose due to religion, with the Church of England fighting to remain dominant in educational provision for the poor and nonconformists arguing against the continued subsidization of the schools run by the Church of England. Consequently, sectarian squabbling dogged every step taken by the government. The first provision by the State for public education was an annual subsidy in 1833 of 20,000 pounds to aid the costs of the running and building of voluntary schools; by 1862 the grant had risen to 775,000 pounds. During the late 1830s, an inspectorate was established to oversee these state-aided schools and a payment-by-results system was introduced during the early 1860s. In 1867 the Second Reform Act was passed, which gave the vote to most of the male, urban working class. This gave increasing impetus for reforming Britain's elementary education system—something for which reformers had been calling for many decades—as it was believed that these new voters needed a minimum level of education. In 1870 the Education Act was passed in which the State, for the first time, turned to the direct provision of elementary schools. Satisfying neither the Church of England nor the nonconformists, the Act maintained the existing system of voluntary schools (most of which were run by the Church of England) and authorised the building of locally-controlled and funded "board" schools in areas where there was an inadequate number of existing schools. In 1880 attendance at

elementary schools from the ages of five to ten was made compulsory and, in 1891, all school fees in state elementary schools were abolished. By the end of the nineteenth century, board schools were the most important provider of education to working-class children, although the Church of England retained a monopoly over schooling in many rural areas.

The situation was somewhat different in Scotland. There, the responsibility for the provision of education rested with individual parishes, which were required to establish schools and pay a schoolmaster, with funds provided from a rate charged on landed property. These schools served both the middle and working classes, and generally led to higher educational attainments than in England and Wales. However, as Scotland became increasingly urbanised during the nineteenth century, this system often could not cope and children started slipping through the educational net. As in England and Wales, Scotland received money to aid its voluntary schools and gained an education inspectorate during this period; it also had a separate Education Act in 1872 that brought in more sweeping reforms than that instituted two years earlier in England and Wales: school was made compulsory for children aged five to thirteen, voluntary and parish schools were transferred to school boards, and many new schools were built. Unlike in England and Wales, religious disputes did not hinder debates over education.

So far, only working-class elementary education has been addressed. In England and Wales during the nineteenth century, there was also a secondary school system that was largely private in organisation and

stratified by class. In the late 1870s, however, some larger urban school boards started to supply higher-grade schools for those wanting to receive further education, although they did not provide a route to the universities. It was only in 1902 that the government created a secondary education system in England and Wales. In Scotland, there were facilities for secondary education in burgh schools and academies, which reached much further down the social scale than in England and Wales; during the 1890s, moreover, increased money was provided to expand post-elementary provision in elementary schools.

Middle- and Upper-Class Education

During the first half of the nineteenth century, formal schooling for middle- and upper-class boys started becoming the norm. Education was often deemed important for middle-class boys due to their work in industry, commerce and, increasingly, the professions. Some were educated at home by tutors, others at endowed grammar schools. A growing number of middle-class parents were attracted by the new private schools which were springing up to meet demand; these could range from one-room schools for lower-middle-class boys to proprietary boarding schools. Finally, many middle-class parents who wanted their sons to become gentlemen also started turning to the expensive public schools—formerly the preserve of the landed classes - which reformed during the mid nineteenth century from being 'nurseries of vice' to institutions stressing gentlemanly conduct, religious and moral principles, self-discipline, independence, organised athletics and intellectual ability. Classical languages, philosophy and literature dominated the

curriculum (although a more modern curriculum, such as mathematics, was also gradually introduced), and many boys who attended the public schools later entered the home or imperial civil service, politics, the professions, or joined the ranks of commissioned officers in the army.

Throughout the nineteenth century, most middle- and upper-class girls were educated at home by governesses or in private schools. While many schools for girls tended to concentrate on the teaching of decorative "accomplishments", an increasing number taught a broad, academic curriculum. In the 1850s, serious schooling for middle- and upper-class girls started to develop, with the founding of the North London Collegiate School and Cheltenham Ladies' College. Grammar schools for girls were also founded from the 1870s onwards by the Endowed Schools Commissioners and the Charity Commissioners. By the turn of the century, some of the more ambitious girls' schools were teaching curriculum geared at university entrance.

The Rise in Literacy

Rising educational provision—especially for working-class children—was one of the primary factors that accounted for the steep and steady decline in illiteracy in Britain during the nineteenth century. However, it must be borne in mind that people also picked up and honed the ability to read and write through other means, including learning and practising at home and through extended education. Moreover, education was not made compulsory and free until the end of the

nineteenth century, so the initiative for schooling largely lay with the parents. Thus, the simple provision of education does not explain the whole story behind rising literacy rates during the nineteenth century; the initiative of parents and children is important as well.

The sum total of these efforts was a steady drop in illiteracy rates throughout the period—even before the introduction of the state system of elementary education in 1870.¹ In 1800 around 40 percent of males and 60 percent of females in England and Wales were illiterate. By 1840 this had decreased to 33 percent of men and 50 percent of women, and, by 1870, these rates had dropped further still to 20 percent of men and 25 percent of women. By the turn of the century, illiteracy rates for both sexes had dropped to around 3 percent. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, Scotland, with its different education system, had lower illiteracy rates; in 1855, for example, only 11 percent of men and 23 percent of women were illiterate. However, by the late nineteenth century, the gap between England, Wales and Scotland had narrowed and closed.

The Reading Public

The rise in literacy in nineteenth-century Britain led to an increase in the size of the reading public. Most of the rise was confined to the working classes and, as such, impacted them the most, enabling more and more people to write letters (allowing them to maintain relationships outside their immediate localities), fill their leisure hours with the reading of imaginative fiction and newspapers, expand their employment opportunities, and follow and participate in politics.

Developments in the newspaper press during this period thus went hand-in-hand with these changes in education and literacy, which created new markets and new audiences.

NOTES

¹ Historians have been able to estimate literacy rates in nineteenth-century Britain by analyzing marriage registers. Under Lord Hardwick's Marriage Act of 1754, only marriages that were recorded in Church of England registers were legal; this required the signature of the bride, bridegroom and two witnesses. In 1836, a system of secular state registration was introduced. Using these registers, historians have been able to measure literacy rates by calculating how many people were able to sign their names. While a somewhat imperfect measure, it does provide a general indication regarding changes in literacy rates throughout the period.

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CITATION

Lloyd, Amy J.: "Education, Literacy and the Reading Public." *British Library Newspapers*. Detroit: Gale, 2007.

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