

# A Century of Educational Organization 1838-1938

By B. A. FLETCHER

**E**XACTLY one hundred years ago a Committee of the General Assembly of Nova Scotia presented to the Lieutenant Governor a report on Education. The list of signatories was headed by the name of Joseph Howe. The report recommended the organisation of a system of free schools to cover the Province based upon general and equal assessment.

This report was not the first indication that the best minds in the province desired a radical change in educational policy. On April 12th, 1824, commissioners had been appointed in each District to solicit and to forward to the Lieutenant Governor as much information as possible concerning the general educational condition of the province. Their reports represented the first comprehensive survey of education in the province ever made. They showed a widespread dissatisfaction with existing conditions and in some cases indicated possible remedies.

The following extracts from two of these reports taken from the "Bulletin of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Volume I, No. I, show the character of his desire for reform.

"Digby, 24th May, 1824"

.... "We further beg leave respectfully to add that, It has been suggested as a sure method of preserving and gradually diffusing useful knowledge through this District, to aim first at the establishment of one good English school that should afford tuition freely, to a limited number of the decent poor, and, at a moderate price, to all other children. It is said that, such a school might hold up one correct example, and "become (at the least) the nursery for a better class of minor teachers

of our own growth, if it did not prove the mother of a sufficiency of similar schools where circumstances invited—The kind of school proposed, to consist of three classes—In the first class, to be taught reading and neat handwriting,—In the second, common arithmetic,—In the third, compound arithmetic with as much of geometry as is applicable to ordinary mensurations.

It might be unjust to force—And it would otherwise be impracticable to unite the generality of this District in a scheme of this kind, because, to all but a few, the advantages would appear discouragingly remote and contingent—There are a very few liberal minded persons—in various parts of our Townships, who would probably aid any spirited neighbourhood that should undertake such a project."

Another extract, this time from Lunenburg, reads:

"Lunenburg, 12th May, 1824"

"....To us however it is obvious, that the rising generation are beginning to feel a strong desire for an alteration, and to feel also, that while they are ignorant of the English language, they must of necessity be shut out from many important privileges, which naturally belong to them as subjects of His Majesty. We shall only add our conviction, that a remedy for these things will principally be found in the general diffusion of English Education and instruction."

The report of the Committee that followed the receipt of these and similar documents stated;—

"Such, then, have the Committee, upon the examination of these documents, in which also their individual information concurs, found to be the actual state of the English Schools; And such as they have stated are the Circumstances which require the adoption of another and better system, and determine the qualities it ought to possess, and the conditions under which it should go into operation—

It ought to be general through the Province; in order that none, even in the remotest and poorest Settlement, may be without some provision for the instruction of youth—It should be compulsory, in every place; because too many are found insensible of the just value of Education, and will use no exertion for having their children taught, nor can comprehend how knowledge operates upon and elevates the character and condition of the poorer classes—It should not be gratuitous, for that which costs nothing is generally valued at Nothing—It cannot be supported from the Provincial Treasury, because the expense, at the most moderate computation, would surpass the disposable income of the Colony—It ought to be maintained by the people themselves; because they and they alone are the Parties upon whom rests the obligation to provide Education for their Offspring, equally with that of their support—Its funds should be raised by a general and equal assessment on the whole population according to each man's ability because thus, and only thus can a sufficient amount be raised to defray the Expense of so extensive yet so indispensable an Establishment,—while the charge to each individual is brought within his means and reduced far below what those who now support Schools are obliged to contribute. Lastly the plan should secure the respectability, and Talents, and consequent usefulness of the Teachers, by the adequateness and permanency of their salary."

Eleven years later another Committee of the Assembly reported in similar terms urging the adoption of free schools based on general assessment. The report describes the New England system of free schools and mentions the similar Scottish parochial system, bringing forward both as examples which justify by their success the principles advocated.

After an interval of two more years a final report was presented in 1838 that was the basis of the legislation that followed many years later. This report again brings forward the experience of New England and Scotland, with the addition this time of Prussia. The report states,

"The Committee to whom was referred the general subject of education, and various petitions respecting schools, beg leave to report—that, on entering upon the discharge of the duties assigned to them, the first question that presented itself to their minds, was the propriety of introducing the principle

of compulsory assessment, to extend, by one uniform system, over the whole Province, and providing for the instruction of the Children of the whole population."

After describing the Prussian system, the Committee makes some observations, that, in the light of the present conflict between the ideologies of democracy and dictatorship, are worth repeating.

"Viewing, as the Committee did, the results of such a system the "Prussian" with astonishment and delight—and anxious as they were to attempt a humble imitation of its scope and efficiency, they feel it a duty to acknowledge that, to the strong Executive arm—to the despotic power of the Sovereign—whose word is law—whose influence is felt to pervade every part of this moral police—must in a great measure be ascribed the success of that bold measure, which in less than twenty years has left scarcely an uneducated person among the millions which Prussia contains. In such a country as this, however, where despotic rule is unknown, we must be content to set the good we have against the benefit which might sometimes be derived from a wise exercise of arbitrary power. A free people will not consent to be benefitted without the concurrence of a vast majority of their numbers, and a people whose revenues are raised by duties upon imports, must have their feelings deeply interested, and be firmly convinced of the necessity of direct taxation—even for an object of the highest importance—or else they will resist and defeat a measure however wisely and accurately framed."

The spirit of these wise words might also be applied to the bold measures of educational reform that are now under discussion in every province of Canada and that are to be discussed here.

Although this report was not implemented by legislation until 1864, its proposals were the basis of Nova Scotian educational organization for the century that followed, and which, once put into effect, have continued without appreciable change until today.

The essential unit in the system is the small School District, collecting and disbursing the major part of school finance; appointing and dismissing teachers; controlling in large measure all educational policy. A similar system, modified in Ontario by the Township

unit and in Quebec by the Municipal unit, has also operated for nearly a century in all the provinces of Canada.

This system was particularly well adapted to the conditions of life in Canada in the nineteenth century. The boundaries of schools districts had to be defined by "the legs of little children." Communities were widely scattered so that communications were difficult at all times and impossible in winter. A simple education of literacy was the only burden to be placed on the small section. There was a fair measure of equality of wealth between sections. The result of placing the responsibility for education upon the sections themselves meant that a standard of education was maintained that would not have been possible by any more centralised system.

In the last decade, there has grown up, in every province of Canada, an increasing volume of opinion that recognises the inadequacy of a system, formulated in 1838, to meet the needs of 1938. The century that has elapsed since 1838 has been a century of greater change than any other century in the history of mankind.

After a century of quiet progress within the limits necessarily prescribed by the 1838 system, Nova Scotia, this year, has appointed a Commission to make another educational survey and to report to the Assembly. This year, in New Brunswick, the Department of Education is examining the report of a similar survey made in 1937. In Saskatchewan, the imposition of a new central Education Tax, has begun to modify the small unit system. In Alberta, a fifth of the province is reorganised into new large units called Divisions. In British Columbia, where experimental large school units have been in operation for several years, it is now realised that the experiments have been successful and that the larger unit idea must be embodied in more permanent form.

It will be interesting and valuable to trace what has happened during the past century to the three countries that were used as models for the Canadian system of educational organisation.

In Germany, prior to 1918, the national government had no jurisdiction over education, which was entirely in the hands in the separate States. The Republican Constitution of 1918, gave the Reich legislative powers and applied national funds to education. In the new system, the important financial and administrative unit was the large State, not the small commune. In nearly all States the salaries of both secondary and elementary teachers were paid by the State. Teachers salaries were everywhere fixed by law. This meant that only a fraction of the revenue of education was raised locally and the largest share of financial and real control was exercised by the large unit of the State. Since the establishment of the Third Reich, the Ministry of Education has pursued a policy of educational unification that has steadily encroached upon the powers of the States, while with the general decay of decentralised self-government, the power of the local communes has almost disappeared.

In the United States of America, modification of the small district system has resulted from two causes; first, almost from the moment of its creation, by state reorganisation from within; secondly, much more recently, as a result of federal aid in education from without. One State, Delaware placed almost all authority in the hands of the central state department of education. In New England, where the district system originated, after half a century, the small school districts were consolidated in a larger Township system. In twelve states the County has become the paramount unit of administration and in five other states partially developed County systems exist. In all states there has been some measure of consolidation of school districts, particularly in regard to the organisation of secondary education. The position of the central state department of education is likely to be still further strengthened as a result of the report of the recent Advisory Committee in Education appointed by the President of the United States. This report recommends the distribution of the sum of \$70,000,000 annually to state authorities and the increase of this sum

by annual amounts until it reaches the figure of \$199,000,000 a year in 1944. This will give to the central departments of education a larger financial share in educational expenditure and this financial control in education is bound, in time, to lead to a more balanced control of administration between the small district and the state department.

In Scotland, between 1918 and 1928, the powers and duties of 1750 small parish school boards were transferred to 36 specially elected County Boards, and a balanced system of administration set up on the English model.

Once again therefore the necessity arises for Canada to examine the systems which other countries have set up for adapting educational organisation to modern needs, and once again the experience of Scotland and the United States of America will merit close examination.

In addition, it is necessary to relate the character of the social and economic change that has taken place since 1838 to the nature of an educational organisation contrived to meet social and economic needs.

The system formulated in 1838, with its aim of placing a school within walking distance of every child was a bold step forward in the history of the equalisation of educational opportunity. It was designed to give the tools of education to a people living in scattered units. Since then education has grown to mean much more than literacy. It is envisaged as a continuous and comprehensive process. It would have been foolish in 1838 to plan for any larger conception of education or any wider unit. Today no serious planning is possible except on the basis of larger units.

The conditions of pioneer existence in 1838 left little leisure time for the pursuit of cultural subjects. What secondary education existed was organised for a minority outside the school section system. The small unit system can never provide anything but a travesty of secondary education, yet this is the burden it shoulders today.

In 1838 the field of occupations was limited almost to farming, fishing, lumber-

ing, mining and trapping. Today, the change from a self-sufficient agriculture to industrial and large-scale production has created the demand for a wide variety of occupational training. Vocational education as an integrated part of secondary education cannot be organised except in terms of the larger unit.

When there were no compulsory attendance laws and when less than six years schooling was fairly common, it was possible for the families living within walking distance of the school-house to support their school. Today, Canada is committed to a program of twelve years of free public education for all of its citizens; to the provision of competent, professionally-trained teachers; to a curriculum that educates not just a limited part of the mind but that develops body, mind, imagination, emotions and will, preparing for civic and economic citizenship; and to the erection of a school plant with modern teaching equipment. This places an impossible burden upon a simple and inefficient financial system.

Since 1838 a great change in school population has taken place. Elementary school enrollment has increased by 50% and secondary school enrollment by more than 500%. At the same time a change has taken place in the distribution of wealth. School districts vary tremendously in their financial ability to support a modern educational program. Real estate, upon which the school districts rely for educational revenue, now represents only a fraction of the real wealth of a country.

Shifts in population and wealth have accentuated this growing inequality between district and district. Some school sections in Nova Scotia are spending today on education \$40 per child per year and others only \$3. Intelligent children are penalised because their parents have to live in a particular locality. A district with a high tax rate may be giving its children a meagre education, in a school building that is a mere shack, with a poorly trained teacher and no proper equipment. A neighbouring section, with a low tax rate, may be providing a modern educational program, with well trained

teachers, high school instruction, modern school buildings and ample instructional materials. Every year such inequalities grow less tolerable to a people committed to the democratic principle of equalised educational opportunity.

An examination of the reforms undertaken in Scotland and the United States of America has been suggested. In addition the time is now ripe for a critical examination and coordination of the experimental work that has been carried out in the provinces of Canada. Although small, it is varied in character and each different method of attack upon identical problems yields experience from which it may be possible to formulate a thoroughgoing scheme of reform.

In Prince Edward Island there is a system of Provincial Grants by which the provincial government bears as high a proportion of educational costs as 69%. In Ontario two townships have experimented with a scheme of school consolida-

tion. In Manitoba, ten municipal units have been organised. In Saskatchewan the consolidation of rural school units has proceeded further than in other provinces and now the government is experimenting with a centralised Education Tax. In Alberta eleven new large Divisions have been organised and eleven more are to be established this year. In British Columbia two areas have been reorganised as experimental large units, with a greater centralisation of administration than in the case of the Alberta Divisions.

From a comparative survey of this work, against the background of American and Scottish experience, it may be possible to draw up a carefully planned scheme of provincial reorganisation that attacks all phases of the problem and develops a well balanced, democratically controlled administrative structure of education, within which progress is possible.

## The Task of a Country Teacher

By C. H. SUTHERLAND

MUCH has been written concerning the importance of the rural teacher to our Nova Scotian communities, but his difficulties and problems have received very little publicity. It is the purpose of this article to discuss a few of those problems.

### Attendance

The teacher's first task is to promote and sustain an active interest on the part of parents and other residents of the section. Their cooperation is essential in carrying on an effective educational programme. The teacher is entrusted with the educational direction of all children between the ages of five and sixteen, and of those over sixteen who wish to take advantage of the facilities

offered by the section. Clearly the minimum amount of schooling must be insisted upon if illiteracy and other conditions making for bad citizenship are to be removed. The regular attendance of all children of legal school age is essential to the progress of both the individual child and the school as a whole.

It is therefore clear that attendance is a major problem of the rural teacher. As many as twenty per cent of the children in a rural community may be offenders, thus creating a problem which is a constant worry to the teacher and which occupies an undue amount of his time. This situation may be the result of:

- Indifference on the part of the parents.
- Poverty in the home.
- Habitual truancy.
- Mental and physical deficiency.