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FOR LOVE OF MEN'S SOULS:
THE BEGINNINGS OF EDUCATION
IN NEWFOUNDLAND

FOR A THOUSAND YEARS wickedness and sin have been universally condemned. Perhaps it is right that they should be. It is time, however, that their many good side effects were examined and appreciated. It is time, in other words, to practise what we preach, and really give the Devil his due. One such side effect is education in Newfoundland; without our wickedness this island race might still be ignorant of arithmetic and denied the blessings of reading and writing. For there can be no doubt that when, early in the eighteenth century, teachers were rushed to Newfoundland they were sent as reinforcements for catechists and preachers; they were thrown into the breach to save our souls, to teach us to read the Word. Reading and even mental arithmetic were regarded as a necessary means to the salvation of our souls.

Proof of the unsurpassed wickedness of our early ancestors in Newfoundland comes from the pens of our own governors and publishers as well as from a cloud of witnesses among missionaries, catechists, and a remarkable variety of local prophets. As the 1790 report of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel so clearly put it, Newfoundlanders are descended from a "barbarous, perfidious and cruel people" (Quoted in F. W. Rowe, *The Development of Education in Newfoundland* [Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1964]). Indeed it is hard to escape the conclusion that Newfoundland was the Flanders of Satan's wicked imperialism. As the inventor of the domino theory in strategy, Satan apparently concluded that if he couldn't win in Newfoundland he couldn't win anywhere. And according to our early writers total victory has never been far from his grasp.

In 1764, Governor Palliser lamented the fact that the majority of people lived "as mere savages without marrying, or christening their children". In

their defence, of course, it could be said that although they were not good enough Anglicans to marry, they apparently shared with that Church the firm belief in the purpose of matrimony, and therefore begat children when duty demanded it. On his departure for England in 1808, Governor Gambier wrote to magistrates:

I cannot take my departure from Newfoundland for the season without earnestly enjoining you to enforce with the utmost rigor, the Laws made against Blasphemy, Profaneness, Adultery, Fornication, Polygamy, Profanation of the Lord's Day, Swearing, Drunkenness, and Immorality (Rowe p. 20)."

In his fascinating book, *Newfoundland and its Missionaries* (1886), the Reverend William Wilson, a distinguished Wesleyan missionary, who was a severe critic of wickedness and the Church of England, also catalogues the ignorance and sins of our forebears. He quotes a Wesleyan missionary, John Hoskins, who wrote from Old Perlican in the 1780s: "My congregation did not know how to behave in divine service, no, not to kneel in prayer, or sing at all; but would stand at a distance and look at me, as if I had been a monster; and yet they call themselves the Church of England." Mr. Hoskins induced in a few souls "a desire to flee from the wrath to come", and with sixteen such persons formed the first Methodist society in the area. But the task was not easy. As Mr. Wilson put it, "neither religion nor learning is innate; every child born into our world is both ignorant and wicked." Wilson fervently prayed for more missionaries and teachers.

In 1877 the Reverend Philip Tocque further documented our wickedness in his *Newfoundland: As it was and is in 1877*. Commending the gallant efforts of the temperance societies, he reported that by 1844 the number of tectotalers had increased to 22,000, though he lamented the fact that of these only 2000 were Protestants. As a result of dedicated temperance work, imports dropped from 277,808 gallons of liquor in 1838 to 94,268 in 1847; nine years later the total was up to 256,361 gallons. In 1858 the Total Abstinence and Benefit Society was founded; and in 1893 the Newfoundland Brewing Company. The Temperance League was rushed into the breach in 1872; twenty years later the number of saloons in St. John's had increased to fifty-eight.

The Reverend William Wilson assures us that as late as the first quarter of the nineteenth century, liquor, particularly rum, was regarded as a necessity of life. Any humour in his condemnation of the fisherman's habits is unconscious:

When [the fisherman] went off to the fishing-ground, he must have a little for

good luck; when he came in with a good "put of fish", he must take a *horn* for joy. If it were a warm day, he could not take a drink of water, because it would make him sick. . . . If he were about to take a journey in winter, he must take a little before he left, to keep the cold out, and a *pocket pistol* (a small bottle) he must take with him, lest he should be overtaken in a snow-storm and perish; and if he got frozen there was nothing like rum to wash the part with.

Mr. Tocque quotes in detail from a report from the Rev. Mr. Meek, Church of England Missionary, in St. George's Bay in 1846. Meek poured out his soul:

I confess that the last year and a half has been to me a season of painful trial, as standing alone in the midst of surrounding evil . . . and often with the sound of the midnight revel in our ears do we lie sleepless, and mentally saying, "Woe is me that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar".

Two years later, 1848, Meek can report no progress. "You would be greatly surprised", he writes, "at the peculiar circumstances of this strange place." Ladies adorn themselves with fine dress, even while pickling herring, and are "found at the balls, to which they are so much attached, mixed up with Indians, Acadians, French, little children, and an indiscriminate collection of all sorts and conditions." He concludes:

The cold we can bear, the snow we can wade through, but the dreadful apathy and insensibility around freezes up the soul. Alas, how different is the missionary's life to what the youthful listener in a London public meeting imagines! And nowhere, I think, is it more tried than in Newfoundland.

He does report with some satisfaction that "the chief fiddler" at the dances might soon forsake his wicked ways. But in general, he admits, "it is uphill work."

It was not until early in the eighteenth century that school teachers were thrown into the battle against powers of darkness. The primary target of these reinforcements, innocents from abroad, was our fathers' souls, not their minds. But their souls were happy to dwell in Mesech and in the tents of Kedar. And, as the second inspector of schools reported in 1845, the teachers' mission was further hampered by the climate, by the migratory life of the people, and by their poverty. As late as 1845, an inspector stated, "only a limited number of schools [were] the happy possessors of slate and paper." It is against this background of ignorance, wickedness, and poverty that we must see the first teachers as they arrived from the Mother Country to impart grammar and mental

arithmetic to the children of Bonavista, St. John's, Sandy Point, and Twillingate. Stanley in Africa must have felt more at home.

These teachers were sponsored, not as is commonly believed by denominations as such, but by a succession of societies. The first school of which we have record was established in Bonavista in 1722 or 1723 with the assistance of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, a society whose aim was "the advancement of the true Protestant religion . . . among those that yet remained . . . in great and miserable blindness and ignorance" (Quoted in Rowe, p. 26). In 1744 the Society set up a school in St. John's, and in the half century following 1766 it established schools in over twenty settlements, including Trinity, Burin, Bay Roberts, Greenspond, Exploits, and Fogo. Among other societies that undertook educational work in Newfoundland were The Society for Improving the Condition of the Poor in St. John's, The Benevolent Irish Society, and the Newfoundland School Society. Their schools pre-dated the denominational system by a century.

From the beginning, a shortage of teachers hampered the work of the schools. In his *Newfoundland and Its Missionaries*, Wilson says that along the whole north shore of Conception Bay where there were thousands of settlers, there was not one school as "no competent teacher could then be found". As late as 1820 there had not been a school in the "large and interesting community" of Blackhead. A missionary wrote from the Blackhead circuit in 1819:

Had we a pious young man, with moderate abilities, fixed here as a school-master . . . I have no doubt a hundred children would be immediately collected, and their parents would contribute gladly to the support of such a master. But in this country such a person is not to be found (Quoted in Rowe, p. 267).

Writing in 1878, Tocque bluntly stated that the school system was "miserably defective", and deplored the fact that "persons possessing a mere smattering of the rudiments of learning, and fit for nothing else were considered competent to conduct the common schools." He continued:

Too frequently the schools were made a refuge from destitution—the last hope of the unfortunate. And many of the teachers felt and acted the veritable saying of the English dame, "It is but little they pays me, and it is but little I teaches them".

Reporting in 1845, the second Inspector of Schools, the Reverend Bertram Jones, painted a dismal picture of schools, teachers, and their salaries. (His report is quoted in detail by T. Hanrahan in the Christmas, 1911, issue of the *Newfoundland Quarterly*). In Joe Batt's Arm "I visited the poor and almost squalid dwelling of an infirm and elderly man who keeps here a school of 25 children on a payment of £5 per annum for his subsistence". At Open Hall

the teacher was "under a cloud", having "demonstrated" at the smallness of his salary, even though it was £25. At Tickle Cove the school was found "in a sordid plight with all windows closed and the air unbreathable". In Turk's Cove Mr. Doyle taught in a "small squalid room", while at Pushthrough twelve pupils were gathered in "a low inconvenient loft accessible only by a high dilapidated stage". But at Fortune "the school . . . is held in a poor dirty abode. The teacher . . . is old and infirm and very much addicted to cursing, swearing and improper language". At Great Burin, the inspector reported, sixteen children were assembled in the teacher's kitchen, "a sad encroachment on the limited space". The Broad Cove teacher was more aggressive than his fellows, executing his vocation from house to house at a salary of £8 a year. "On the day of my visit", the inspector noted with displeasure, "he was in the woods." The Renew's teacher wrote to the superintendent: "i keeps choall in my own house, the number in need of unstruction are 36 their progress in larning is very good". At Cape Broyle, where the school register showed 36 names, the teacher "informed me the school was not in operation as the schoolhouse was filled with hay". At Admiral's Cove, Mr. Jones reported, the teacher "was not sufficiently *communicative* for me to collect much information about the school."

With the passing of the first Education Act in 1836, the government committed itself to the concept of state aid to education. The first grant was only £210, but the principle irrevocably committed the state to increasing expenditures reaching eight million dollars in 1970. The government took two steps to improve the calibre of teachers. It appointed an inspector and it established training programmes for teachers.

The appointment of inspectors was at first welcomed. The *Newfoundlander*, a twice-weekly newspaper, in 1858 urged that evils could only be remedied by applying "the axe to the roots" in a system where incompetent and "half-starved teachers have been unable to wring their miserable school fees from shameless parents" (Quoted in Rowe, pp. 139-40). Inspectors' reports were frank and unsparing of teachers and schools. As late as 1861, little progress was noticed in the Turk's Cove school, criticized by the second inspector in 1845. "And I am afraid", says the inspector, "there is very little hopes of any from the present teacher." In Cape Broyle, the inspector did not find "the results one would wish to see from a school where the teacher receives £40 a year. The Codroy teacher was "not very competent", and the Twillingate teacher could not even "keep the books", for "the sum set down as balance

from last year does not correspond with the amount then stated to be on hand."

It is one of the fundamental laws of human society—enunciated here for the first time—that every solution begets a problem. Inspectors were appointed to solve the problem of incompetent teachers. But now criticism shifted from teachers to inspectors. For teachers and local school boards saw in these snoopers from St. John's a threat to their security and a snub to their ability. The Trinity board, for example, complained that they were "unanimously of the opinion that the money allocated for that purpose is money thrown away, no matter how efficient the person employed in that service may be" (Quoted in Rowe, p. 142). (The criticism was silenced when the Act of 1874 allowed an inspector for each of the three major denominations).

School inspectors survived as a race until recently. Their visits, and even rumours of visits, struck terror into the hearts of teachers and pupils alike. We had many times witnessed the activities of fish inspectors and had no doubt that pupils were to be culled, some to be cast out. When we expected one to be visited upon us, the teacher acted nervously and caned good behaviour into the worst of us. She urged us to come to school looking neat and tidy, and frantically coached us in tables and sums; for parsing it was too late.

Though the remembrance of the visitations is still painful to me, I retain a vivid memory of only one. On an October day in the early thirties, a thin and grave-looking inspector showed us a lantern slide of an elephant with an arrow protruding from his vast posterior. We wanted to snicker, but were prevented from doing so by the certain knowledge that, as an inspector had come all the way from St. John's to show the slide, we were supposed to learn something earth-shaking from it. But the moral escaped us. Several theories were discussed. Young Selby Pond said that we were to be careful when playing with arrows. Dorothy, a mature girl with two or three years experience in grade six, argued that the elephant picture taught that pupils should have a target to aim at. The moral we finally settled on was that we were to be kind to elephants, and from that day to this the village of Pilley's Island has recorded few, if any, instances of cruelty to animals. Such was the influence of inspectors on a grade-three boy.

The other attempt to provide better teachers was the establishment of training programmes. Although the Newfoundland School Society, formed in 1823 through the efforts of Samuel Codner, had some excellent teachers as early as 1842, local board teachers, as we have seen, left much to be desired. In 1853, therefore, the government was persuaded to make a contribution of

£200 toward a teacher-training programme. The Act of 1876 raised the government contribution to \$4611.00 and prescribed a syllabus for the three-year training programme.

In the first year the pupil-teachers were required to take Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Grammar, Geography, and History. Sample questions from a first-year examination paper illustrate the demands made upon them. (This paper is presented in Rowe, p. 123). The first question was on the Scripture and was in two parts: 1. Write out a short life of Abraham, Joseph or Jacob. 2. Write out "Duty towards God". This part of the question would have taxed the imagination of most Newfoundlanders. Grammar was also stressed. The question: "Name the parts of speech in the following sentences: 'John struck the table violently with a black stick'". Without asking why anyone would strike a table with a black stick, most of the teachers nevertheless came through with flying colours. British History was seriously studied owing to the demand for it in the outports. Part of the History question read: "Write any account you can of Alfred the Great or Canute". They wrote any report they could. It is only now that university students are demanding that studies be relevant. But what could be more relevant to the interests and needs of Newfoundland pupils in 1876 than a thorough knowledge of Alfred the Great? Yet there were many poor little children in Bonavista, Joe Batt's Arm, and the Bay of Islands who knew little about him and almost nothing about Canute. We can only imagine with what joy they anticipated the return of teachers from St. John's filled to the ears with parts of speech, compound rules, simple operations, vulgar fractions, and the latest news of the Wars of the Roses.

However vulgar the fractions, it is possible that Newfoundland pupils would have known none at all had not foreign preachers and societies been so determined to erase wickedness from the Colony. As the Reverend Dr. Harvey put it in his book with the unlikely title *Newfoundland as it is in 1894: A Handbook and Tourists' Guide*, "denominational zeal perhaps furnishes a stimulus to educational effort which would otherwise be wanting".