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978-0-521-08048-4 - Feminists and Bureaucrats: A Study in the Development of Girls' Education in the Nineteenth Century

Sheila Fletcher

Excerpt

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Introduction: The Endowed Schools Act

The result of all this movement . . . was one of the best measures in the history of this government of good measures.

John Morley, *Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, 1903

It is not fashionable these days, either for historians of education or for those interested in women's history, to dwell on the importance of Acts of Parliament. For one thing, we have learnt that there is more to life than ever appears in the statute book; that it will not do to pursue Education Acts 'like mountain goats, jumping from peak to peak'¹ nor to subsume the complex progress of women towards emancipation into little more than the campaign for the vote. To devote much time, then, to a minor statute largely concerned with the formal schooling of the Victorian middle classes calls for some sort of justification. And broadly this must rest upon the interest which should attach to the Endowed Schools Act, 1869, as an early essay in social engineering and one which unusually, if not uniquely, singled out girls as beneficiaries.

It is important to understand the bureaucratic pretensions of this measure. If, in the nineties, our education system could be likened by Morant to a house built by someone 'working spasmodically on odd portions of the structure on quite isolated plans . . . his very best efforts . . . rendered abortive by the fact that . . . he possesses no clearly thought-out plan of the structure as a whole',² it can only be said that this Act was not to blame. Its purpose was to provide machinery to operate a very well-thought-out plan: namely, the methodical reorganisation of the old grammar schools so as to ensure that everywhere in England middle-class parents, from clerks to country gentlemen, would find their wants supplied. It is actually the case that, in point of time, power was taken here to give them secondary schools before it was taken to give them elementary schools, or even drains. When the work was attempted the man put in charge of it, Lord Lyttelton, averred that he and his colleagues 'never meant to

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introduce that phalansterian system, as it may be called, that has been imputed to us . . . to cut up the country into so many squares, and have so many schools in each square'.³ They may not have meant to; but if they had, they would have done no more than work to the drawings prepared for them by the Taunton Commission, that great inquiry into secondary education whose very drastic recommendations they had been appointed to carry out.

Had all gone as planned, then, Robert Morant would have inherited an education building with a well-ordered secondary wing where the superstructure really matched the foundations. The fact that the plan failed should not distract us either from the boldness of the conception or from the importance of what was possibly its most original component: that endowment should be taken from the old foundations to establish grammar schools for girls. At a time when, to all intents and purposes, secondary schools for girls did not exist, when hardly anyone wished them to exist, this Act created them.

It has not been much praised for it. Admiration attaches more readily to individuals than to Acts of Parliament. Although the climate of apathy and prejudice in which this pioneering measure was administered was precisely that in which those pioneering women – Frances Buss, Maria Grey and Emily Davies – also laboured for girls' education, they are more acclaimed in the standard histories. There, legislation is essentially bloodless and we read of what *was done* under an Act as if it was done by no human agency.

The Endowed Schools Act of 1869 is well fitted to dispel this illusion. A good deal of blood was spilt over it at one time; and even with the passage of years, in the last decades of the nineteenth century when it no longer attracted headlines, its operation was fiercely opposed. This is not surprising since it authorised Commissioners more or less completely to overturn the past in an endeavour to adapt the endowed schools to the needs of contemporary society. They could combine or divide endowments, alter governing bodies and curricula, impose fees and abolish those restrictions which so often had had the effect of making the grammar schools an Anglican preserve. In the same innovatory spirit they could take money away from boys' schools to benefit girls; an extraordinary provision, but of a piece with the rest of the Act which in its every clause seemed meddling, destructive, even sacrilegious to many people. For it broke with the practice of administering charities in conformity with the

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wishes of the founder; or, as some would have preferred to put it, released them from the grasp of 'the dead hand'.

In practice, however, the exceptional powers bestowed on Lyttelton and his colleagues were modified by the hoops they had to go through before their Schemes could have the force of law. A Scheme was a trust deed, the school's constitution, and laid down for ever – unless it was amended – what was to be taught there, to whom, at what fee. The composition of the governing body as well as its powers and those of the headmaster were all defined and the Act provided elaborately for objections to be heard, both in and out of Parliament, before any Scheme attained the Royal Assent. As to girls, the position was clouded by the fact that, far from issuing a directive that they should share in every endowment, the Act left it open: in the words of Section 12, they should share 'so far as conveniently may be'. The question comes to mind, how could it be convenient? When is it convenient to part with money – and for the education of girls? In 1869 the prospect was such as to daunt any modern appeals consultant.

Public sympathy was almost non-existent. The Act began to be applied at a time when Miss Buss's schools, for all their success, could scarcely raise £50 on appeal, though £60,000 was quickly contributed to endow a new boys' school in the City. It was still being applied nearly thirty years later at a time when the claims for women at Cambridge made by Emily Davies and others were hailed by the display of an effigy in bloomers while the debate went on in the Senate. Between these two points, though, some ninety girls' schools were established under the Endowed Schools Act. This means that something approaching that number of governing bodies parted with endowment. When we look at how they were persuaded to do so we are led directly into the area where the Victorians fought to resolve their conflicting views of the position of women.

We are also led to observe at close quarters the working of a group of Victorian administrators at a time when bureaucratic orthodoxy in its modern sense was just taking root. The 'heroic' generation of civil servants – Edwin Chadwick, Kay-Shuttleworth and others – had receded long before 1869. Those master-builders of Victorian social policy, tireless in inquiry, openly partisan, had mainly given way to men who did not see their function as creative. When Kay-Shuttleworth's successor, Lingen, told a committee in 1865 that he had never thought it part of his duty to extend the country's educational system, this was the voice of the new bureaucracy. Relics of the old one might

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continue. Patronage survived for nearly half a century after open competition came in and the individuality of government departments was noticeable up to 1914. But the individuality of government servants was not a marked influence in policy-making in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The new profession shaped by Northcote and Trevelyan was essentially unassertive. Much was done, for instance, over these years, in the field of elementary education but very little of it derived from the initiative of civil servants.⁴ In this context, against the background of 'a bureaucracy gently ossifying, concerning itself primarily with pushing out again the paper that came in',⁵ it is startling to discover a group of civil servants who were as conspicuous as others were discreet: these were the three Commissioners appointed to administer the Endowed Schools Act.

Between them they demonstrate the hybrid nature of the public service in the 1860s. Lord Lyttelton, who was in charge of the Commission, a man connected by marriage to Gladstone, had never worked for a salary before but was exceedingly glad to have one. Apart from that, he took on the Commission rather as Lord Shaftesbury took on the Board of Health: out of an overriding sense of duty. Arthur Hobhouse had made his mark as a lawyer and Charity Commissioner and Canon Hugh Robinson came to the work from being Principal of St John's College, York. They were united by a common zeal, not for the drudgery which lay before them – which Lyttelton was certainly disposed to dread – but for the principles behind it. 'I always looked upon ourselves', wrote Hobhouse, 'as missionaries sent to lighten the heathen, and to be persecuted and perish at their hands; as a forlorn hope told off to die in the ditch, and who are successful if those who come after can mount the wall.'⁶ Such words alone are enough to distinguish him from the new style of professional civil servant which was beginning to emerge at this period. They might have come, though, from Edwin Chadwick if he had been given to flights of fancy; and Hobhouse, looking back, compared the new Commission with the Poor Law Commissioners appointed in the thirties. Both made 'a brave and sincere attempt to put in action a law sound in principle but new and distasteful in character'. Both, he might have added, were applying legislation which gave them enough rope to hang themselves. And both did hang themselves; that is to say, both were disbanded after public outcry.

The missionary spirit of Hobhouse and his colleagues and their

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Secretary, Henry Roby, sprang from involvement with the problems the Endowed Schools Act was intended to solve and a firm faith in the solutions it offered. These were men of a reforming temper. To fellow-reformers in that lively body, the Social Science Association, Hobhouse and Lyttelton had spoken frankly against the dead hand which lay upon endowments and Robinson had urged the drastic remodeling of endowed schools in the national interest. Further, there existed an umbilical cord between the Commission now appointed to administer the Endowed Schools Act and the Royal Commission which had given rise to it. The great inquisition into secondary schooling chaired by Lord Taunton had led to revelations of the sad state of so many grammar schools that there was considerable support for an Act which promised to restore the nation's heritage. And now the restorers were strongly recruited from those who had made the investigation. Lyttelton had served upon the Taunton Commission. Henry Roby had been its Secretary. The famous Report included chapters they had drafted and its recommendations for grading schools owed much to the evidence of Canon Robinson. There was another link of great importance. The uniquely experienced Assistant Commissioners who had tramped round the grammar schools of England for Taunton now supplied the Assistant Commissioners and Assistant Secretary of the new body.

Here, then, in the 1870s were public servants with a stake in their work; men who cared for, indeed had helped to formulate, the principles they were called on to apply. At a time when Education Department officials spent their days poring over grant agenda and John Simon wrestled with the sterile paperwork that occupied the Local Government Board the Endowed Schools Commissioners made themselves notorious by their wholehearted commitment to reform and in the end were sacked for it. This small red splash in the bureaucratic greyness may intrigue the student of administrative history. Somewhere the Commissioners must have a place in the nineteenth-century revolution in government. Were they a throwback to the 1830s? What is the importance of their curious status as an administrative Board without a minister?

However, what we are concerned with here is the effect they had on people at the time and, in particular, with their importance to girls' education and the women's movement. The omens for women were very good in the missionary appointments of 1869. Here were men wholly sympathetic to the view that modernisation of the

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grammar schools should entail some provision for girls; who, as we shall see, were already involved in the movement to advance girls' education and now, for the five years while they held office, did their utmost against great odds to apply the girls' clause of the Endowed Schools Act. The claims of women, the feminists conceded, as that period approached its end, had been considered by the Commissioners 'in a way they have never been considered before'.⁷

Then came a change. The Endowed Schools Commission, so very much a creation of the Liberals, almost from the first had managed to upset powerful Anglican and Tory interests. Disraeli could not wait to get rid of it and in 1874 when the Conservatives came in the Commission was disbanded. As for the Act, that was handed over lock, stock and barrel to be administered by the Charity Commissioners in what was hoped would be a more temperate vein, and they applied it until 1903.

Whoever gained from this change girls were losers. The *rapprochement* which had hitherto existed between feminists and bureaucrats melted away. The law was unaltered and Schemes for girls' schools continued to be made; but their share in the reorganised endowments fell and in this respect, relative to boys, they were worse off at the end of the century than they had been in 1875. Section 12 of the Endowed Schools Act may have been, as a Victorian writer put it, 'the Magna Carta of girls' education'⁸ but only in the hands of those determined that it should be. This determination was greatly reduced by the changeover of 1874.

The women's movement had foreseen what would happen but, in the event, did nothing much about it. Perhaps there was nothing much it could do. In this area bureaucrats were pacemakers. Yet the tailing off is all the more striking because, to begin with, it was the women who had set the pace. Here indeed is the essential starting point: in the 1860s, when bridges were built between the women and the administrators. Before we turn to that, though, we must look more closely at the Act itself, for the seeds of the *débâcle* of 1874 and, as a result, of the loss to girls, were sown already in the passage of this exceedingly forceful measure.

It was a first-fruit of Liberal government in that era which Gladstone looked back on as one of liberation and advance. With the Endowed Schools Act, it might be said, the Liberals had begun as they meant to go on. Here, before they created School Boards or ended religious

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Tests at Oxford and Cambridge, they breached the Anglican hold on education.⁹ Here, too, before the idea of merit was thrust upon the Army and the Civil Service, it was thrust upon the grammar schools.¹⁰ And here the Liberals made a break with the past as bold in its way as Irish Disestablishment, rejecting the legal dogma of *cy près* which for generations had tied charitable funds ball-and-chain to the wishes of the founder.¹¹ The Act's preamble looks ahead: the endowed schools are to be reformed with the object of 'putting a liberal education within the reach of children of all classes'. W. E. Forster, presenting the Bill as minister responsible for education, acknowledged that those who had endowed the grammar schools were guided by the new ideas of their own age: 'they were fighting for industry against feudalism . . . And now, again, new ideas have power – this new central idea, bringing with it many others, that no special class is to guide the destinies of England . . . that England for the future is in truth to be self-governed; all her citizens taking their share, not by class distinctions but by individual worth.'¹²

The principles underlying reform, though, are barely glanced at in the Act itself, outside the preamble which directs attention to the recommendations of the Taunton Commission. It is simply clear that great changes are on foot; that from now on it will be up to school governors to make a case on historical grounds for doing what they have done without reflection – run the grammar schools as Anglican establishments; that in future the claims of girls may be admitted, regardless of what was intended in the past. The past, from now on, is to yield to the present and most of the fifty-nine clauses of the Act are in fact devoted to constructing machinery to make this possible. Thus, the new Commissioners are given power to reorganise the grammar schools far beyond any that the Court of Chancery or the Charity Commission has enjoyed.

How did it come about that such a measure went through Parliament without much trouble? Later on, when the fat was in the fire, the ease of its passage seemed disconcerting. Parliament, someone said, was 'taken on the blind side'; or, as one of the Commissioners put it, the effects of the Act 'had not been discussed and were not understood by those who passed it'.¹³ At a distance it is not hard to see why. For one thing, the Bill went through in the shadow of a much more publicised, more controversial measure; it would not have passed, according to Hobhouse, 'had not people's attention been absorbed by the Irish Church Act'. And for another, though the case

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for reform, as presented by the Taunton Commission, was sufficiently acknowledged for Forster to claim that his Bill was not a party measure, few could visualise what reform really meant. The Taunton inquiry had been exhaustive. A countrywide investigation of the old grammar schools had been carried out, extending sometimes to cover private and proprietary schools as well. Witnesses were heard, vast data collected; and the result, in twenty-one volumes, was an indictment of the system – or rather, of the chaos that was found to exist in school education above the primary level. The ancient grammar schools, it seemed, survived where the seventeenth century had left them and not where they were most needed in the nineteenth. They were often 'languid', 'somnolent', 'decayed', some even scandalous, some at the level of an indifferent elementary school. Almost everywhere teaching was bad, statutes archaic and trustees failing in the duty that was laid upon them. A sense of waste pervaded the Report, of shame, almost, that the old foundations had been allowed to degenerate.

It would have been hard, in the face of all this, to argue that there was no room for improvement and no one tried to. The Taunton remedies – for example, that the grammar schools be graded as to fees, leaving age and curricula to suit the three strata of the middle classes, and that free schooling depend on merit – aroused little comment, possibly because few imagined what they would involve in practice.

'Eleven hundred schools', *The Times* said later, 'mean three or four thousand squires, clergymen, farmers and tradesmen, with as many idiosyncrasies, prejudices and traditions as the diverse neighbourhoods over which they exercise a mild dominion. Each of the little corporations thus composed had to be invited to start on a more or less new career, to abandon some exclusive rights, to make novel experiments.'¹⁴

There is no sign that in 1869 people like this knew what was going to hit them. Those who did know, or thought they knew, were the governors of some of the great foundations. The Greycoat Hospital trustees in Westminster petitioned for their school to be excluded from the Bill; the Duke of Richmond made a similar plea, during the debate, on behalf of Christ's Hospital; a deputation from the city of Bristol urged that their Hospital Schools should be exempt while a similar claim was made by Members on behalf of various public schools. Later, such people felt they were misled by Forster's assur-

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ance, in the House and elsewhere, that good schools had nothing to fear. But at the time, the concept of a 'good' school was not very carefully examined.

The religious question, or that part of it which created so much trouble later on, was not much argued; probably because no one yet knew where the shoe would pinch. Much would depend on the Endowed Schools Commissioners' interpretation of the relevant clause and no one knew who the Commissioners would be until the Bill had passed its second reading. Naturally this gave rise to annoyance but it also made it harder to focus opposition. The Bill, as one Member said, was simply the embodiment of the feeling that there should be reform. The whole of its working would be left to a Commission 'consisting of three persons not named who were to exercise greater functions than Parliament itself. . . in former times'.¹⁵ A picture of this 'all-powerful triumvirate', as yet anonymous, scouring the land, ready to 'arraign and depose the trustees of the most flourishing . . . as of the deadest and most paralysed school', was painted by the arch-Tory, Beresford Hope. The Government sought to allay such fears by showing how tightly the Commissioners would be reined. Everything they did would be mere waste paper, Forster said, before it had passed 'the ordeal of Parliamentary assent'. And he described that ordeal at length: every Scheme would have to be published locally; after a statutory period for objections it would be submitted to the Education Department; only if approved would it be laid before Parliament; and only at the end of forty days, if neither House objected, would it become law.

The procedures were clear; but Members were not clear in what relation the Commissioners stood to Parliament. Assurances that they were 'but the creatures of the Government who would be responsible to Parliament for their proceedings'¹⁶ were not necessarily reassuring. It was just this close connection with the Government that aroused Conservative suspicion: these men in fact would be Liberal nominees. Later, when their stern application of the Act had made them unpopular they were indeed arraigned as tools of a party bent on destroying all established values and especially the Church. But now there was the sense of a job to be done which should be done quickly. The Endowed Schools Bill was in any case only a temporary measure. Originally it had had two parts: a temporary part, for reform of the grammar schools, and a permanent part which would have set up a council to maintain standards in the schools once reformed by

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organising regular examinations and scrutinising and registering teachers. These proposals, too, came from the Taunton Commission but for some they had an authoritarian flavour and verged too much on systematic control. Forster dropped them. When the Bill was in committee it was divided and the plan for a council left to a second Bill, later forgotten. What the Commons, then, were asked to endorse was a brisk reorganisation of the grammar schools by Commissioners appointed for three years only, with possible extension of their powers for a fourth. No one seemed to give serious attention to the question whether a task of this magnitude, involving as it did some 3000 endowments, could possibly be completed in the time; indeed, no estimating was attempted, beyond the sardonic view expressed by John Walter that Commissioners had as many lives as cats 'and there was very little fear, in his opinion, that that term of three years assigned in the Act would be anything but the first of the nine'.¹⁷

By the time the Bill arrived in the Lords the names of the three Endowed Schools Commissioners and of their Secretary had been announced; more than that, at a public meeting held by the Society of Arts Lyttelton and Hobhouse had made quite clear that when it came to administering the new Act they would not expect to pay much deference to founders. How could they be impartial? asked Lord Salisbury. Considering their opinions, 'it would be necessary to watch very jealously the large powers which the Bill proposed to intrust to them'. Apart from this the Bill had a fairly smooth passage, again presented as a non-party measure which would achieve much-needed reform. Lord Ripon, introducing it, drew attention to the fact that it took 'particular notice' of the education of girls.

In point of fact, Section 12 was anomalous in a measure which ignored the detail of reform. Of course the Bill was meant to empower Commissioners to carry out the Taunton recommendations: to grade schools, abolish free education, break the exclusiveness of governing bodies, modernise curricula and, where possible, extend the benefit of endowment to girls. But none of these was mentioned, except the last. All the rest were covered, as that might have been, by the blanket authority to do what was needed to make endowments 'most conducive to the advancement of the education of boys and girls, or either of them'.

Why were girls singled out? The reason seems to be that Section 12 had different antecedents from the rest of the Act, which was, in general, yet another product of concern to make old charities serve