I French education in the period immediately preceding the Revolution

In order to assess the effect of the French Revolution in the field of education—what it did, what it proposed to do, what it failed to do—it is necessary first to examine the educational provision that was available in the country before the Revolution occurred. It is certainly not true that under the Ancien Régime France lacked educational facilities; in this respect she was probably in a better position than any other European country. But although schools of various kinds, colleges, technical institutions and universities existed, they were on the whole in need of reform and badly distributed and their mutual relationships were ill-organised. Also they were in almost every case directly or indirectly under the control or supervision of the Church. This is not to say that the State had never shown any concern about educational matters. For example, the reform of the University of Paris in 1600 had been due to ‘L’ordre et la volonté du trés-chrétien et très invincible roi de France et de Navarre, Henri IV’, and not to any ecclesiastical authority. Again, after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) Louis XIV issued a series of edicts and declarations designed to reinforce its implications. In 1698 a decree was issued that children from the age of seven were to be compelled to attend Catholic schools up to the age of fourteen. But as the necessary elementary schools were lacking in many areas a further ordonnance decreed that ‘as soon as possible schoolmasters and schoolmistresses shall be appointed in parishes where
there are none, in order to instruct children of both sexes in the mysteries of the Catholic Apostolic Roman religion, and also in reading and writing (for those who will need this).”¹ The cost of providing schools and of paying teachers was laid on the inhabitants of the area concerned, and the whole system was put under the supervision of intendants, as representing the central authority. But there were no State grants to implement these decrees, and it proved extremely difficult to raise any kind of local education rate. However, the enactment of 1698 was re-affirmed in a Déclaration du Roi which dates from 1724. It was equally ineffective. It can therefore be said that prior to the Revolution the intervention of the State in the field of education had been more apparent than real. Although such intervention was, like the Revolution itself, really a political move, it was ostensibly undertaken in defence of the Catholic religion; and it remains true that, such as it was, the educational system of France remained almost entirely under the control of the Church.

Elementary education at the end of the Ancien Régime was organised in several different ways. In the cities and larger towns the ‘little schools’, some for boys and some for girls, were run by masters and mistresses who had to hold a licence, renewable annually and issued by an official called the ‘scholaster’ (écolâtre), who acted as the representative of the bishop. These schools could take children as young as seven, who were taught to read. The custom of teaching the elements of reading by the use of Latin words—usually from the Salve Regina or the Penitential Psalms—was by this time gradually being given up. When sufficiently proficient

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in this art, the pupils were advanced to writing and elementary arithmetic—often with the use of counters (jetons). The elder children, aged nine to eleven, might even begin Latin; and there was of course at every stage considerable emphasis on religious instruction and practices. The teaching was given individually to each child in turn, while the rest were following in silence or learning something by heart. The simultaneous method of class-teaching was not yet used in this type of school. In the girls’ schools needlework took the place of Latin. In order to finance these ‘little schools’ the licensed masters and mistresses were entitled to charge fees which seem to have varied from place to place or according to the position of the pupil in the school; but there was usually a clause in the scholaster’s licence to the effect that the children of very poor parents were to be educated free. In some districts no school-fees were exacted from anyone, especially where the school had been endowed by a founder and not provided by the inhabitants of a parish.

In country areas the control exerted by the scholaster over ‘little schools’ was less direct. The appointment of the schoolmaster or schoolmistress was usually made by a committee of the local inhabitants, convened and presided over by the curé; or it might be made by the local seigneur if he had founded and supported the school. But in either case the selected candidate was still required to apply to the scholaster, or other episcopal deputy, for the necessary licence (lettres de régence), though this requirement seems sometimes to have been evaded. It is interesting to note that the State, in the person of the intendant, had also to confirm the appointment, but only in order to see that the terms of the contract between the teacher and his employers were
being observed. He did not oppose or rival the Church’s authority; but in the long run his position in this respect contributed to the secularisation and centralisation of education during the Revolution.

Owing to their poor salary and low status many of the teachers in the ‘little schools’ were ignorant and incapable; but sweeping statements about them are not justifiable. In some cases—e.g. at Paris—the standard seems to have been fairly rigorous, and everywhere, as has been said, the maître or maîtresse d’école had to be licensed by the bishop through his scholaster. It was mainly in the country districts that, owing to lack of suitable candidates, the licence might be given to ‘eating-house keepers, to hairdressers and to showmen’. The country schoolmaster often acted also as sacristan or sexton; but in many cases—and this is especially true of the girls’ schools—the school might be handed over to a teaching congregation and staffed by members of it. The root of the difficulty, as regards lay teachers, was that there were no facilities for teacher-training, and perhaps a belated realisation of this explains the interest in normal schools shown in the educational programmes of the Revolution period. But even after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes a certain ecclesiastic named De Chennevières had submitted a memoir\(^1\) to Louis XIV in which he referred to ‘L’incomparable nécessité d’établir un séminaire de maistres et un de maistresses d’escole en chaque diocèse’.

Mention should be made of a type of elementary school which was found in Paris and some of the other large towns in France. This is the writing school maintained by members of the Guild of Scriveners,

\(^1\) The original of this document is in the Bibliothèque Nationale, and its date is 1686.
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whose corporation had been authorised as far back as 1570. Their prime concern was with transcribing legal documents and giving advice in cases of suspected forgery; but they were also allowed to teach writing, spelling and simple arithmetic. Thus their work not only supplemented, but also tended to compete with, that of the official ‘little schools’; and there was continual friction between the two types of institution.

The ‘little schools’ licensed by the scholaster, and the writing schools of the Scriveners’ Corporation, were not of themselves sufficient to provide a complete system of elementary education. In many parishes therefore the local curé supplied the deficiency by starting an elementary school in which the teaching was often done either by himself or by his curate (vicaire). These charity schools were quite free and little was taught in them beyond reading and religious instruction. They were under the control not of the scholaster, but of the curé himself, though they might be inspected from time to time by the rural dean. These schools were founded and maintained by funds raised by the Church—parish collections, gifts and bequests; and encouragement was given to possible benefactors. In four successive Assemblies of the French clergy (1750, 1755, 1760 and 1765) the necessity for founding parish schools is stressed. Where this was not possible parishes sometimes maintained Sunday schools (écoles dominicales) which simply taught the catechism and the bare elements of reading. Their existence shows that they catered for those who had received no education in a ‘little school’ or a charity school or elsewhere.

Charity schools were sometimes maintained not by parishes, but by private individuals or by religious orders. The Ursulines, for example, had three hundred
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houses in France in the second half of the eighteenth century; and the Congregation of Notre Dame, founded by St Pierre Fourier, was also conspicuous for its work in this field. It was estimated by Taine¹ that in 1790 there were in France about 37,000 nuns, a considerable number of whom belonged to various teaching orders. But the most conspicuous of all these congregations was the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, which had been founded by St Jean-Baptiste De La Salle in 1684. It had made great contributions to education in France—for example, in technical education and in the training of its members; but its chief importance was in the field of free popular education for boys. Although the De La Salle schools had to face competition and opposition from the ‘little schools’ and the writing masters, by the year 1790 there were 125 of them in various parts of France, with some 1000 teaching brothers and 36,000 pupils. The Institute also made some important contributions to the techniques of elementary instruction. For the ‘individual’ method, to which reference has been made, De La Salle substituted the ‘simultaneous’ or class method of teaching. Moreover, instruction in reading was from the beginning related to French, and not to Latin, words. De La Salle also introduced a type of ‘higher primary school’ in which the curriculum was extended to include mathematics, modern languages, drawing and book-keeping. In all types of educational institution run by the Christian Brothers tuition was free.

To sum up, then, we can say that the provision of elementary education in the period immediately preceding the Revolution was by no means lacking, but it

¹ See Les Origines de la France contemporaine (6 vols, Paris, 1876–94), 1, chap. ii.
was very badly distributed. The Abbé Allain has discussed this matter in some detail and the statistician Maggiolo has investigated the percentage of illiterates, as indicated by the number of those who were able to sign their marriage registers during the years 1789–90. The north of France seems to have been comparatively well provided with elementary education. In Paris, for example, there were 334 ‘little schools’ (167 of them for girls), as well as writing schools and parish charity schools. In the diocese of Rouen there were only fifteen communes out of 102 which did not possess an elementary school. In Artois an inquiry made in 1790 showed that nearly every village had a maître d’école and often a mistress as well. At Rheims there were boys’ schools in nearly all the parishes; and this was true even in the country parishes of Alsace, Lorraine, Franche Comté, Côte d’Or and Auxerre. In some rural areas, however, it was customary to run the school only from All Saints’ Day to the end of May, so that the children could be free to work on the land during the summer. On the other hand many parts of France were very badly off for elementary schools; and this was especially true of the thinly populated central and western districts—e.g. Périgord, Saintonge, Gironde, Limousin, Auvergne, Brittany. From generalities like this, however, it is difficult to get a clear idea of the actual value and content of the elementary education given in various parts of France in 1789, and here possibly Maggiolo’s statistics1 may be of some value. It is noteworthy, but natural, that the areas where the percentage of literacy is lowest almost always coincide with those least provided

with primary schools. In the Franche Comté, for example, 78.85 per cent of the men and 29.12 per cent of the women were sufficiently literate to sign the marriage register; but in Guyenne, between the Garonne and the Dordogne, the percentages were only 12.4 for men and 7.7 for women. During the years 1786 to 1790 in the whole of France, including the big towns, 47.45 per cent of the bridegrooms and 26.28 per cent of the brides were able to sign their names. At the same time it may perhaps be questioned how far ability to sign one’s name is a real test of literacy. In some schools—especially those for girls—the pupils were not taught to write at all. We even read of a maîtresse d’école who objected to teaching girls to write lest they might be enabled to send notes to young men. Quite apart from statistics, it is clear that the general standards of teaching, the character and qualifications of the lay teachers, the premises and equipment and hygiene of the schools in many cases left much to be desired. The best elementary schools obviously tended to be the petites écoles in the cities and big towns, and also those run by members of religious orders who had been dedicated to, and trained for, the work of teaching.

Secondary education under the Ancien Régime was provided in the collèges of the teaching congregations and of the Arts faculties of the universities. These ran a course¹ for boys who had already learnt to read and

¹ It lasted normally for six years, followed by another two years of ‘philosophy’. It was arranged as follows (read from the bottom upwards):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physicien</th>
<th>Logicien</th>
<th>Iième (Rhetoric)</th>
<th>IIième (Humanity)</th>
<th>IIIième (1st grammar)</th>
<th>IVième (2nd grammar)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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write and had acquired a smattering of arithmetic and elementary Latin in a ‘little school’ or elsewhere. It has been estimated that on the eve of the Revolution there were 562 collèges of various kinds in the country, and that they contained 72,747 pupils of whom about 40,000 held ‘free places’ (bourses). To this we can add a number of petits séminaires. These took pupils from the age of twelve who were designed for the priesthood and who would be transferred at the age of seventeen or eighteen to a grand séminaire— a specialised theological college. For girls secondary education was provided in convent schools—most of them boarding establishments—run, like many of the elementary schools, by teaching orders of women.¹ The age of the pupils would be from about ten to eighteen. In the boys’ collèges the staple of the curriculum was Latin and Greek, though some of the teaching orders also provided instruction in such subjects as mathematics and history; and the teaching of Greek in some of the Faculty of Arts colleges was said to be unsatisfactory.² In all types of school alike religious instruction and observances bulked largely.

Of the teaching congregations concerned with secondary education by far the most important was the Society of Jesus which had started work in France in 1565. It rapidly extended its influence and some of the most prominent Frenchmen of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—e.g. Descartes and Voltaire—were educated in Jesuit schools. It was even said that ‘nobody who reasoned against the Jesuits but owed it to the Jesuits that he was able to reason at all’. But the

² Cf. ‘Jamais le proverbe ancien Graecum est, non legitur ne reçut une application plus juste qu’aujourd’hui’ (Philipon de la Madeleine, *De l’éducation des Collèges*, Paris, 1784, p. 127).
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Society remained ultramontane in outlook, and in spite of its educational efficiency it incurred a rising tide of criticism, and this resulted in the expulsion of the order from France. Its dissolution was pronounced by the Parlement de Paris in 1762, and this was confirmed by royal edict in 1764. At this time there were no less than eighty-six Jesuit colleges, grouped in five different provinces, in the whole of France. The expulsion of the order involved the closing down of these schools, and this meant a most serious loss to the provision of secondary education. Various attempts were made to fill this gap. The Parlement de Paris sent four of its members to the chief universities of France in order to collect information and report on possible schemes. It was suggested that the colleges vacated by the Jesuits might be brought under the jurisdiction of local universities; but difficulties of staffing and organisation, as well as disputes and jealousies, prevented action being taken. At Paris, however, some of the smaller colleges of the university, which were languishing and had few students, were amalgamated with the College of Louis-le-Grand, which had been the chief Jesuit school in the metropolis. It was hoped that the re-organised institution might prove ‘une pépinière abondante de maîtres dont l’État a besoin et qui répandront partout l’éducation’—a scheme for training teachers which was abortively developed thirty-one years later during the Revolution.  

1 The *parlements* were supreme law courts. They also had the right of ‘registering’ royal edicts, and of ‘remonstrating’ if there was anything with which they disagreed. In 1789 there were in all thirteen *parlements* in France, but the area of jurisdiction of the Parlement de Paris was by far the largest and covered nearly one-third of the whole country. Refer to the map in Cobban, *History of Modern France* (2 vols, London, 1962), 1, 67.

2 See below, pp. 152-5.