CHAPTER ONE

The enquiry: scope, method, texts

The enquiry

The intentions and limitations of this enquiry are an essential part of it: they do not belong to a preface, even though they are expressed in personal terms. The enquiry has two sources. I have always been puzzled by statements that English is a relatively recent addition to the curriculum:

1983 '[It is surprising] how recently English has entered the curriculum . . . Our very notion of literacy – of a functional command of reading and writing – is a development of the nineteenth century.'[1]

1978 'English is a comparatively new subject.'[2]

1974 'A young subject, less than one hundred years old . . . It is not till the end of the nineteenth century that there was anything even approximating what we now roughly subsume under the heading "the study of English".'[3]

1919 'Of conscious and direct teaching of English the past affords little sign.'[4]

The second line of thought was also interrogative. I was surprised that historians of education, whose work on the institutional, social and legislative aspects of their subject was sometimes detailed and vivid, said so little about what happened in the classroom itself. It seemed unlikely that there was no evidence, and even more unlikely that such evidence could be dull. These two lines of thought coalesced into an intention to see what early evidence there was for the teaching of English in school. I am interested in what teachers did, in their intentions and in the methods by which they tried to realise them. My emphasis is bound to be on teaching more than on learning, because that is where, historically, the emphasis has been. This book is therefore the product of a singlehanded journey of exploration. I must stress its exploratory nature, not defensively, but because the type and quantity of the evidence could not be known

[1] Colin MacCabe, *The Guardian*, 28 February.
[2] Peter Gordon and Denis Lawton, *Curriculum change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, p. 80.
[3] Arthur N. Applebee, *Tradition and reform in the teaching of English: a history*, pp. ix, 5.
[4] *The teaching of English in England* (Newbolt Report), para. 18, the first in a 'historical retrospect'.

beforehand. The results of the enquiry have been affected not only by limitations on time, money and competence but also by the necessarily raw condition of most of the evidence. The explorer returns after a long absence with bottles, boxes and bags. On arrival he exclaims, in a variety of modest phrases, 'Look what I've found!', but it takes him longer to sort out his findings than it did to collect them, and he needs the help of many specialists before it can be known whether he has brought anything useful. The more he analyses his material the more he feels that if only he could make the journey again in the light of the knowledge he now has his miscellaneous collection could be made orderly, coherent and complete.

The enquiry is restricted to the three centuries before 1870. It is not perverse to stop it just at the date when many people suppose English teaching to have begun. The year 1870 is a convenient mark for the culmination of what could be described as the first modern phase in the teaching of English, and Edwin A. Abbott and J.R. Seeley, in the dedication of their *English Lessons for English People* (1871), considered that 'the present seems to be a critical moment for English instruction'. To study the subject after 1870 would require a different approach and different methods, appropriate to the increasing quantity and diversity of evidence. Such a study needs to be made, in more detail than has yet been attempted. I have sought evidence mainly from textbooks and from a certain amount of general writing on education which bears directly on the teaching of English. The volume of evidence has turned out be so great that the textbooks, standing at first just at the centre of the area to be explored, have come to mark its limits, beyond which stand biographies, local and school histories, local newspapers, periodical literature, mid-nineteenth-century educational journalism and reports of government committees: all awaiting the comprehensive investigation for which I hope I am helping to prepare the way. I have chosen to cover the textbook material fairly thoroughly, over the whole period. To shorten the chronological range of the enquiry would spoil one of its main purposes. To have brought into it, as samples, a little evidence from all the relevant areas would have made it broader but too superficial. If all the relevant material were to have been covered thoroughly the enquiry would have collapsed.

A survey which includes the teaching of reading, spelling, rhetoric, logic, composition, grammar, elocution, poetry, fiction, drama, over a period of 300 years necessarily touches on important social and cultural issues. The teachers are figures in an enormous landscape, which I have not attempted even to sketch in. Neither the reader nor I would take any pleasure in a shuffle of abstractions and influences, named and then dropped. Even to

outline – particularly to outline – with discrimination such an extensive background (not just a few trees in a park) for these very varied teachers would require a rare kind of scholarship and skill.

So little is known of the work of these early teachers that I have given a lot of detail, especially in direct quotation, but not, I hope, an oppressive amount. I have wanted the teachers to speak for themselves whenever possible. They are authentic and vivid. If they are longwinded I have cut them. Provided they are quoted fairly they present more accurately than could be done by any summary their intentions and their methods. I have also followed the teachers in discussing what they considered important and what they found difficult, even if sometimes we are impatient with their preoccupations. Their detailed and at times emotional concern with the functions of letters and syllables is an aspect of the history of pedagogics and of linguistics which has not yet been studied in detail, and even chapters 2 and 3 of the present work, which express some of this concern, are no more than an introduction.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there is a close relationship, sometimes supportive, sometimes crossgrained, between British and American textbook writers. *The New England Primer* was first published about 1690; the earliest American spelling-book, *An Epitome of English Orthography* in 1697; the earliest American grammar of English in 1773: Thomas Byerley's *A Plain and Easy Introduction* (Alston IV, 189; I, 315). But textbooks originating in America were rare until the 1790s. The majority were imported from Britain; many were reprinted in America. The earliest American printing of an English spelling-book seems to have been the 1716 Boston edition of William Thompson's *The Child's Guide to the English Tongue*, and of a grammar the 1775 Philadelphia edition of Lowth's *A Short Introduction* (Alston IV, 284; I, 228). The present enquiry draws on much of the known American material before 1800, but some unique copies have not been consulted because they are too frail even to photograph. After 1800 the number of relevant texts increases rapidly and it has not been possible to use their evidence in a way which is systematically representative. But as American material grows more abundant it also grows more distinctive. I have therefore drawn as fully as I can on accessible American works and on a few early nineteenth-century texts from American libraries. American texts are even less known in Britain than are early British texts in America. The small number which are mentioned here may encourage more detailed study: they are not an adequate base for generalisation.

The enquiry is an enquiry, not a tract. I am not seeking to show that what

teachers of English do now has been thought of before; nor that our predecessors used methods which we ought to adopt. I comment often on particular methods and on the work of particular teachers, but I am concerned with change more than with estimates of progress. I am not looking at the past in order to rebuke, or to encourage, the present; but I believe that most of us find that our teaching has greater depth and more interest, for us and often for our pupils, if we have a picture of what earlier generations were trying to do, and some awareness of our professional roots and of the variety of soils through which these roots strike. Such considerations, however, are less important than the pleasure, which it is pointless to analyse, of entering imaginatively a little way into the mind of someone doing work which seems to resemble your own (though how close the resemblance it is not always easy to say) in circumstances which are very different (though how different it is, again, not easy to say). I like the mixture of surprise, recognition and sympathy with which I read about George Moore, a country schoolmaster in Massachusetts, who wrote in his school journal for 25 December 1828: 'Happened to think that today is Christmas, but saw no one taking any notice of it, and thought, if I did, I should appear rather off, and so let it pass. Informed scholars for the first time that *composition* would be required of them weekly.'[5]

Criteria: skills in English

The subject English is notoriously difficult to delimit even today, and before questions can be asked about its historical development certain problems of method have to be resolved. If questions about evidence relate solely to activities which in the twentieth century are considered to be components of English, for instance composition, it would seem (in that example) that this branch of English was first taught early in the nineteenth century, when the first textbooks appeared referring to composition by that name. Such a conclusion would be false. What we call composition was taught, in English, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century schools as part of a subject called rhetoric and through the writing of themes. Obviously enough our search must be for relevant activities, whatever they are called. Activities which are components of twentieth-century English teaching can be identified without difficulty when they are found in the past, even if they have an unfamiliar name; but we cannot assume that twentieth-

[5] Quoted by William J. Gilmore, 'Elementary literacy on the eve of the industrial revolution: trends in rural New England, 1760–1830', *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 92.1, April 1982, 109.

century activities are the only ones to have been components of the subject. There may well have been activities, perhaps called English, perhaps not, which were components of the subject but now are not. What the enquirer needs is criteria of relevance more general than specific activities and more permanent than their names. Such criteria are those often used nowadays in an attempt to set limits wide enough to encompass the range of activities within the present subject English, but not so wide that they cease to be limits. These criteria are the four skills which the activities are intended to develop: expressing yourself in speech and in writing, in your mother tongue; understanding (in a very broad sense of the term); and judging what you hear and read.[6]

These criteria enable us to decide, for example, the relevance of translation into and out of Latin; of logic and rhetoric, taught in English and Latin in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century schools; of textbooks of memory-training throughout most of the period. They do, however, still leave uncertain the status of the teaching of reading, spelling, pronunciation and handwriting. Although reading is a skill preliminary to almost all subjects, not just to English, it has always been so closely linked to the teaching of English that it would be strange to ignore it. It is in fact to the teaching of reading and spelling that *English*, as the name of a subject, is first applied: by Francis Clement in *The Petie Schole*, 1587, who includes in his preface 'a word or two with the english teacher'. The relevance of reading and spelling is further strengthened in two ways. The textbooks which are evidence for *how* children were taught to read are also evidence for much of *what* they were first given to read; and the teaching of children how to read was for a long time inseparable from, and sometimes identified with, teaching them to spell. One of the unexpected products of this enquiry is the abundant evidence relating to reading and spelling and to the complex difficulties with which the teachers were struggling. The teaching of pronunciation arises, usually indirectly, in efforts to teach the sounds of the letters and the division of syllables, in the organisation of spelling-lists by phonetic criteria and in the teaching of elocution. The teaching of handwriting, although by analogy with spelling it might be considered a basic component of English, is excluded from the enquiry except in so far as some copybooks provide small fragments of literary experience. In neither past nor present practice has handwriting had the quasi-linguistic status acquired by spelling through its methodological links with reading and its practical links with etymology.

[6] Cf. Department of Education and Science, *English 5 to 16*, HMSO, 1984.

Treating the subject historically under the two headings expression and understanding (or, as I prefer to call it, interpretation) fails, however, to accommodate grammar. Grammar and linguistic study generally are, like rhetoric, relevant both to interpretation and to expression. Grammar is largely concerned with structure. In seeking to understand what we read we need to perceive its structure; in expressing ourselves we are constantly using our knowledge of the structure of the language, especially when fluency falters and we need to exercise conscious control. But the teaching of grammar has been until recently so autonomous an aspect of English teaching that it would be misleading to divide the study of its development between expressive and interpretative skills, as is just possible in the study of rhetoric. This enquiry is therefore organised in terms of four skills: reading and spelling; interpretation; expression, including performance skills; linguistic control. These divisions and their names are not wholly satisfactory, but none would be. 'Interpretation' may seem a pretentious term in this connection, but it is a reminder, as 'comprehension' and 'understanding' are not, that the pupil's response to what he or she reads is not solely intellectual, and is very far from being mechanical; it is a selective response, influenced by the pupil's feelings, and it entails a measure, however small, of personal judgment.

Texts

The enquiry is based on a study of textbooks, but it is not always easy to say what a textbook is. The difficulty is important because I have undertaken a very tentative quantitative analysis of the material, and this is necessarily affected by marginal judgments about what is relevant. By a textbook I mean a book used by pupils in class; or a book read out of school in preparation for work to be done in class; or a book used by teacher or parent for practical guidance; or a manual of self-instruction. I have recorded all the British texts about which I have any information, even if no copies now exist, or if they exist but I have not seen them. I have attempted to categorise the texts, but it is impossible to do so satisfactorily. Many textbooks contain material relating to more than one of the four skills. A spelling-book may contain fables for the children to read and grammar for them to learn by heart; a grammar may contain lists of the figures of speech and exercises in composition. Nevertheless, if any analysis is to be attempted, some categorisation must be attempted. I have therefore allotted each British title to one of fourteen categories, showing the type to which it primarily, if not exclusively, belongs. Table 1 shows the

distribution of these texts (in their categories, here conflated into ten groups) over six periods of fifty years between 1571 and 1870: periods which coincide as well as any would with phases in the development of English teaching. Table 1 records also a number of British texts dating from before 1571 or after 1870 which are included in the discussion but not in the analyses, and the small number of American texts that I have consulted. The enquiry is based on about 2700 texts, of which about 70 per cent have been consulted.

Tables 2–5 show in more detail the distribution, in five-year periods, of the texts recorded in groups 1, 2, 5 and 7. For the periods up to 1770 the texts recorded in group 4, nearly all of them rhetorics, have been included in both Table 3 and Table 5. This is an attempt to allow for the fact that rhetoric covered both interpretative and expressive skills.

With one exception these analyses, though rough, will permit some generalisation. There is, however, a particular difficulty over literary texts. Children's literature has been much studied, but neither the books themselves nor their modern critics give much guidance as to the extent, if any, to which an individual book might have been used in school. We do not at present know enough about classroom practice to distinguish on any general grounds children's books which are likely to have been used in school. We know that pupils were more likely to study poetry than prose: it was shorter, more difficult, and more rewarding to learn by heart. We think that in the classical schools it was a common assumption during the whole of the period that reading English literature was a proper, but private and domestic, part of a young gentleman's upbringing (and more so of a young lady's). But we know also that the 'English schools', in contrast to the grammar schools, gave considerable attention to the reading of English literature, even if there was little formal teaching of it until the second half of the eighteenth century. We suppose that as books became less expensive children would sometimes, perhaps often, bring to school some book to read on their own, to copy, to memorise, to be influenced by. I have therefore judged each literary text individually: from the implications of its title, from its preface, from what is known about the author, from other external evidence.

Over the period as a whole, teachers and the writers of textbooks paid more attention to linguistic training than to the teaching of interpretation. But we may not yet be able to see correctly the balance between these two activities. Textbooks dealing with language are self-evidently textbooks; grammars especially attract the attention of bibliographers and are easily identified. Works of literature, whether anthologies, selections from a

Table 1. *Chronological distribution of texts*

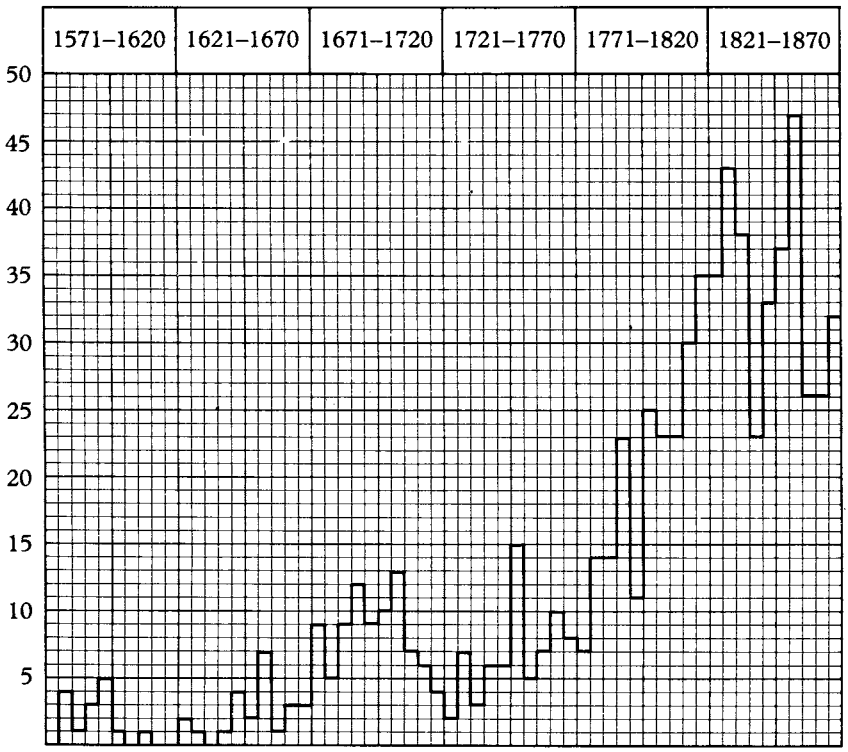
		1571–1620	1621–1670	1671–1720	1721–1770	1771–1820	1821–1870	Total recorded	Total consulted	% consulted
1	T	15	25	83	69	185	339	716		
(S, RE)	C	9	21	55	48	74	192		399	
	%	60	84	67	70	40	57			57
2	T	6	1	7	34	173	325	546		
(RA, RH, RS)	C	6	1	7	30	138	209		391	
	%	100	100	100	88	80	64			72
3	T	–	–	–	7	55	28	90		
(P)	C	–	–	–	7	44	20		71	
	%				100	80	71			79
4	T	7	8	8	15	25	18	81		
(B)	C	7	8	7	13	21	14		70	
	%	100	100	88	87	84	78			86
5	T	3	11	15	49	204	377	659		
(G)	C	3	10	15	47	158	193		426	
	%	100	91	100	96	77	51			65
6	T	2	–	2	15	34	56	109		
(La, D)	C	2	–	2	13	25	25		67	
	%	100		100	87	76	46			61
7	T	3	1	7	9	27	42	89		
(Ex)	C	1	1	6	7	22	28		65	
	%	33	100	86	78	81	67			73
8 (C)	T	–	1	6	6	17	7	37	35	
9 (Ed)	T	3	9	12	19	33	44	120	120	
10 (Lo)	T	3	5	2	6	7	5	28	27	

British total, 1571–1870	2475	1671	68
Texts before 1571	9	8	
Texts after 1870	41	18	
American texts	183	183	
Overall total	2708	1880	69

T Number of texts recorded
C Number of texts consulted
% Percentage of recorded texts consulted

Group	Category code	
1	S	Spelling, excluding orthographical reform; dictation; elementary punctuation; exercises in false spelling.
	RE	Elementary reading.
2	RA	Anthologies; single-author texts; readers not in series; copybooks.
	RH	Books primarily for home reading but perhaps used in school.
	RS	Readers in series
3	P	Performance; elocutionary and dramatic texts; pronunciation; memory.
4	B	*Belles lettres*; rhetoric; criticism; prosody; history of literature.
5	G	Grammar; exercises in false syntax; advanced punctuation.
6	La	Language; vocabulary; orthographical reform; etymology; history of the English language.
	D	Dictionaries used in school.
7	Ex	Written expression; oral expression when distinguished from performance; debate.
8	C	Compendia.
9	Ed	Educational texts relating to English teaching.
10	Lo	Logic: texts likely to have been used in school.

Table 2. *Texts recorded in group 1: spelling and elementary reading*[1]



[1] The vertical axis represents the number of new texts published in each of the five-year periods into which the horizontal axis is divided.

single writer, or individual novels or plays, are not necessarily textbooks. They become textbooks if they are used in school. They are not so readily identified by their titles and they do not show up in a bibliography as clearly as linguistic texts. Inspection is necessary, and not always sufficient, to establish their status. Many more works will have to be examined from this point of view before we can assess the volume of textbook material available for the teaching of interpretation. I have not seen enough of such books to be at all sure about the balance, especially during the nineteenth century, between the teaching of language and the teaching of interpretation. I have no doubt that the figures for group 2 (literary texts) are understated.

Textual conventions

The authors' spelling, punctuation, capitals and emphases have been kept throughout, except that long *s* and consonantal *i* and *u* have been