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INTRODUCTION

This volume of *Transactions* is notable not only – of course – for what it contains, but also for what it does not contain. Readers will find the usual varied fare of papers read at the Society’s meetings – the cream of recent scholarship – as well as three of the papers read at the colloquium on ‘Croatia and Europe’ held at the University of Leicester on 27 March 2013 to mark Croatia’s entry into the European Union – an unusual and timely reminder of an important geopolitical story not often included in standard accounts of European history. As for the missing contents – with this volume, *Transactions* will no longer include the Society’s annual report and accounts. This change will decouple the publication of report and accounts necessary for the AGM from the publication of *Transactions* and will enable us to include more academic content in the latter. The annual report and accounts will be made more widely available by publication before the AGM in November on the Society’s new website (www.royalhistsoc.org). I encourage all Fellows and Members to take a look, not only for the full annual report, but also for the wide range of new resources now available on the website: an archive of policy documents (the Society’s but also other scholarly and public bodies), on subjects ranging from the school curriculum to freedom of information; podcasts of all of the Society’s recent public lectures; information on upcoming events of interest to historians; application forms for proposing new Fellows and Members and applying for the Society’s early career research grants and fellowships; a guide for early career historians; and much more relevant not only to the Society’s activities but to the rich world of historical research beyond.

We intend in the coming year to extend the usefulness of the website to Fellows and Members: to allow you to pay your dues and buy additional publications online; to encourage you to list your research interests and thus build up an enhanced directory of historical research for public benefit; and to permit online voting for Fellows electing members of Council. This enhancement of the website is part of a renewed effort on our part to improve the services we provide both to our members and to the wider community. For our members, we want to make easier and more regular communication between them and their Society, to encourage more participation in our governance and events, and to migrate our high-quality publications – a tradition we have been maintaining since before our foundation in 1868 (the Camden Series dates from 1838,

though we inherited it only in 1897) – to new formats that will keep them vital in the twenty-first century. For the wider community, we want to provide direct access to serious scholarship through our lectures (now all available for free online) and publications (on Open Access to the greatest extent feasible, at moderate subscription rates where not), and to serve as a gateway for news about history and historical events more generally.

In making these changes, we are seeking both to perform the traditional functions of a learned society – support for research and publication, lectures and conferences, recognition of achievement through grants and prizes – and to continue to take on new functions called for in a rapidly changing academic and political landscape. One of the positive features of recent decades has been the growing recognition of historical research in libraries, archives and museums, and we are keen to recruit more Fellows and Members from among researchers in these places, as well as to provide distinctive forms of support for them (such as the Aylmer Seminar for archivists, historians and archivist/historians, that we co-sponsor with the Institute of Historical Research and the National Archives). Less happily, as the network of higher education breaks up into competing institutions with their own interests and bottom-lines firmly in view, we find that we have more and more to perform the functions formerly taken up by government bodies and the network of vice-chancellors, which establish and defend healthy norms for the discipline: access and choice in undergraduate and postgraduate provision for History; the centrality of academic freedom and quality in funding decisions; the importance of ethical peer-review in publication, hiring and promotion decisions; maintaining the conditions for a fulfilling academic career in history and ensuring such a career is open to all comers.

Increasingly, too, we have sought to represent the interests of high-quality historical scholarship in public-policy debates. The two issues that have dominated our agenda this year have been the school curriculum – where, working closely with the Historical Association, representing schoolteachers, we have been intimately involved in the reworking of the curriculum at all levels from Key Stage 1 to A-Level – and Open Access publishing – where we have sought to widen access without sacrificing academic freedom and quality through the wrong kind of regulation. More detailed information on both issues is available in recent newsletters, which are posted on the website. But we have also been engaged in more quiet work on many other issues: defending the freedom of historical research in Brazil and India; playing a role in upcoming commemorations of the centenary of the First World War and the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta; taking a leaf from the scientists' book in raising questions about gender equality in the humanities; drawing attention to the effects of the quasi-privatisation of English Heritage; arguing for the preservation of the decennial census.

INTRODUCTION

3

None of this would be possible without the hard work and dedication of our small staff – Sue Carr, our Executive Secretary; Mel Ransom, our Administrative Secretary; Jane Gerson, our new Research and Communications Officer – and our voluntary leadership, the officers and members of Council. It is the best part of my job, working with these people, on such a varied diet of enterprises, all of which fly the flag for the best historical scholarship, our goal for nearly 150 years now.

Finally, this is the place to mark the loss on 9 April 2014 of Sir James Holt, President of the Society 1981–5, a great medieval historian and an adornment to the profession.

Peter Mandler
President

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TRANSACTIONS OF THE
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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By Peter Mandler
EDUCATING THE NATION I: SCHOOLS*

READ 22 NOVEMBER 2013

ABSTRACT. This paper assays the public discourse on secondary education across the twentieth century – what did voters think they wanted from education and how did politicians seek to cater to those desires? The assumption both in historiography and in popular memory is that educational thinking in the post-war decades was dominated by the ideal of ‘meritocracy’ – that is, selection for secondary and higher education on the basis of academic ‘merit’. This paper argues instead that support for ‘meritocracy’ in this period was fragile. After 1945, secondary education came to be seen as a universal benefit, a function of the welfare state analogous to health. Most parents of all classes wanted the ‘best schools’ for their children, and the best schools were widely thought to be the grammar schools; thus support for grammar schools did not imply support for meritocracy, but rather for high-quality universal secondary education. This explains wide popular support for comprehensivisation, so long as it was portrayed as providing ‘grammar schools for all’. Since the 1970s, public discourse on education has focused on curricular control, ‘standards’ and accountability, but still within a context of high-quality universal secondary education, and not the ‘death of the comprehensive’.

In these lectures, I will address Britain’s transition to a mass education system, at both secondary and tertiary level, over the whole of the last century but especially since the Second World War. I have to report that when I mentioned this to a colleague recently, he said, ‘History of education? Really? Well, there goes *your* career.’ I thought that an odd comment – not least because my career is much closer to its end than to its beginning – but it does betray a widespread sense in our discipline that the history of education is a dull or marginal or a dead-end subject. I will not now go into *why* that should be, but I will try to demonstrate how misguided it is. Especially for the most modern periods, education is surely one of the most important fields of enquiry, for political, social, cultural,

* I am grateful for many comments from the audience at this lecture, and for subsequent discussions with Laura Carter, Jon Lawrence, Sian Pooley, Gill Sutherland and Selina Todd, which have improved this published version.

even intellectual history. It is one of the principal sites of socialisation – *the* most important site outside the family. It is one of the places where the state enters most regularly and directly into the lives of its citizens. It helps to make us whom we are. It is therefore tightly enmeshed with questions that everyone acknowledges lie at the heart of our contemporary historical agenda – questions of class and gender, of national and other group identities, of social reform and social mobility, of the relationship between state and civil society. For the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it plays roughly the role that religion played in the preceding centuries.

The specific theme that I will be taking up is the move from an elite to a mass education system, and the consequent emergence of a ‘democratic public discourse’ about education. I use this term ‘democratic public discourse’ in two senses. First, I address the question of how Britain changes its educational system in response to the advent of democratic political conditions. Second, I will be focusing more specifically on how public discourse on the provision of education changes – that is, not what are the hidden agendas behind educational change but rather what is or can be said in public about the role of education, by politicians and policymakers (with an eye on the reactions of the democratic electorate), but also, crucially, by the citizens of the democracy themselves, all of whom have direct experience of education as students and most also as parents. Together, these two approaches to the democratic public discourse of education will allow me, I hope, to say what kind of education democracy wants: whom is it meant to serve and for what purpose?

In this first address, I will examine the transition from elite secondary education at the beginning of the century, to universal secondary education in the middle of the century, to mostly comprehensive education from the 1970s to the present day. In the following address, I will chart the rise of mass higher education. Both these addresses will focus on who benefits from the education service. In the third and fourth addresses, I will be considering the purposes of education, taking in turn the thorny question of social mobility and finally the curriculum. Throughout, the focus will remain on the public discourse about who and what education is for; thus questions of funding and administration, though clearly entangled with and placing constraints on what it is possible to say about education in public, will take a back seat.

I start with the advent of universal secondary education over the course of the twentieth century. I should say at the outset that I do not regard Britain as some kind of special case in this regard – still less a ‘basket case’, as much of the literature holds: to cite the standard work by Andy Green, ‘distinctly backward by comparison with other leading western states’.¹ It

¹ Andy Green, *Education and State Formation: The Rise of Education Systems in England, France and the USA* (Basingstoke, 1990), vii.

is perfectly true that Britain came relatively late and haltingly to universal primary education – Prussia had ‘compulsory attendance laws’ from 1763, France had universal provision from 1833, and Britain did not provide free and universal primary education until 1880. But we should beware facile comparisons shaped deliberately to exaggerate British backwardness. The Prussian state was unable to enforce its allegedly compulsory laws and did not provide free and universal primary education until 1868. France did not provide free and universal primary education until 1882. Thus, these three states were roughly in synch by the late nineteenth century.²

More importantly, the timing of universal primary education bears little relationship to the timing of universal secondary education because they were largely distinct systems. Universal primary education was driven by nation- and state-building (in Western Europe, mostly in the nineteenth century), as nation-states sought to ‘make peasants into Frenchmen’ (as the famous instantiation by Eugen Weber put it)³ by inculcating literacy in the national language and a basic education in civics and patriotism, aimed at small children before they entered the workforce at 11 or 12. Universal secondary education had quite different drivers. In the nineteenth century, a strict divide was erected by most states between primary and secondary education – the first was civic education for all, the second was about elite selection and training, for around 2–3 per cent of the population. There was no need to connect primary and secondary education, as elites did not use state primary education and the masses did not use state secondary education; indeed, elites had an interest in maintaining a barrier between the two, so as to limit the inroads of the masses into the elite to at most a manageable trickle. Almost the sole exception to this rule was the United States, which in the nineteenth century did have an unusual commitment (at least in lip-service) to social mobility.⁴

When in the early twentieth century states began to extend access to secondary education, their motives were driven in large part by novel, democratic considerations. As sociologists of education have argued, the two principal drivers to universal secondary education were humanistic and economic. On the one hand, most Western states (and increasingly non-Western ones) in the twentieth century have viewed education as about the development and socialisation of the individual; this is where education has increasingly assumed the role of religion, in providing for the moral and spiritual needs that are generally assumed to be intrinsic to the human condition. On the other hand, twentieth-century states have

² *Ibid.*, 3–5, 12–13, and cf. *Mass Education and the Limits of State Building, c. 1870–1930*, ed. Laurence Brockliss and Nicola Sheldon (Basingstoke, 2012), 1–2, 89, 98–101, 118.

³ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, CA, 1976).

⁴ *Mass Education*, ed. Brockliss and Sheldon, 1–3.

also looked to the economic benefits of education to advance the interests both of individuals and of nations in an increasingly competitive economic environment. Both of these approaches, fortified by (but not requiring) the advent of democracy, have tended to be ‘universal, standardised and rationalised’. Over the course of the twentieth century, therefore, secondary education has had a tendency everywhere to be more about individuation than about stratification, and therefore to become less elite-oriented and more democratic.⁵

In this development, Britain did not start out (nor, I will argue, did it become) backward. Though Andy Green scolds backward Britain for excluding working-class children from secondary education before the Second World War, with compulsory schooling ending at 13 or 14, in fact Britain had the latest school-leaving age and the most years of compulsory schooling of any European state in the early twentieth century. In other words, all other countries stopped compulsory schooling at 14 or earlier, and none required the nine years of compulsory primary schooling from 5 to 14 that Britain required before the Second World War. Access to secondary education was limited everywhere, but in the 1930s Britain probably offered as much as France and Germany and by the 1950s and 1960s a good deal more than them.⁶ Britain was not the ‘slow’, ‘backward’ educator in this period, ‘sixty years behind its neighbours’, as it has been portrayed in a ‘declinist’ literature determined to find fault with its social and economic development; it was, rather, where you would expect it to be, comparable to other northern and western European states, and well ahead of the southern European states.⁷

⁵ John Boli, Francisco O. Ramirez and John W. Meyer, ‘Explaining the Origins and Expansion of Mass Education’, *Comparative Education Review*, 29 (1985), 145–70, quote at 147–8; Fabrice Murtin and Martina Viarengo, ‘The Expansion and Convergence of Compulsory Schooling in Western Europe, 1950–2000’, *Economica*, 78 (2011), 501–22. An intermediate position is taken up by *The Rise of the Modern Educational System: Structural Change and Social Reproduction, 1870–1920*, ed. Detlef K. Müller, Fritz Ringer and Brian Simon (Cambridge, 1987), who argue that the early phases of secondary expansion were characterised by both ‘systematisation’ and ‘segmentation’.

⁶ Michael Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change in England* (1987), 119–20. The statistics cited by Sanderson are not strictly comparable – 6 per cent of the 15–18 cohort in England and Wales, 7 per cent of the 11–17 cohort in France, 8.8 per cent of the 11–19 cohort in Germany – but these point to roughly equivalent measures for the 15–18 cohort for Britain and Germany, both somewhat ahead of France.

⁷ Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden, *Education and the Working Class*, 1st edn, 1962 (rev. edn, Harmondsworth, 1966), 236; G. A. N. Lowndes, *The Silent Social Revolution: An Account of the Expansion of Public Education in England and Wales 1895–1965* (Oxford, 1969), 72, 105, and approvingly cited by R. A. Butler in his introduction, iv; I. G. K. Fenwick, *The Comprehensive School 1944–1970: The Politics of Secondary School Reorganization* (1976), 23; Green, *Education and State Formation*, vii, 6, 306–7, 313; Adrian Wooldridge, ‘The English State and Educational Theory’, in *The Boundaries of the State in Modern Britain*, ed. S. J. D. Green and R. C. Whiting

Like most of its obvious comparators, then, Britain started out the twentieth century with a state secondary system aimed at elite training and ended up with a universal system. How did this happen and why? The conventional view is that Britain moved from an elite-training system in the nineteenth century (based on private schools and quasi-public grammar schools) to an elite-selection system in the mid-twentieth. It was therefore not truly universalistic. The dominant ideology in this period is held to have been the rise of ‘meritocracy’, the belief that secondary education should add to hereditary social elites a selection from other classes based on ‘merit’ or intellectual aptitude.⁸ I will argue instead that the idea of ‘meritocracy’ was short-lived and inherently unstable in the public discourse of education. Many competing ideas jostled in the political sphere between the 1900s and the 1950s, and the more universalistic ones were always most likely to triumph.

Both political parties were split in their initial ideas of how to organise access to secondary education. Most attention has focused on Labour, whose limp commitment to universal and equal secondary education is taken to be chiefly responsible for British backwardness.⁹ It is true that Labour was divided. On the one hand, its highest hope, voiced by R. H. Tawney (notably in *Secondary Education for All*, the policy document he wrote for the Labour party in 1922), was for ‘a single system’, ‘a progressive course of general education’ for all children 11–16.¹⁰ On the other hand, especially on the ground, Labour was dedicated to improving access for working-class children to the existing network of secondary schools – that is, the fee-paying grammar schools, which from 1907 were enabled in return for government subsidy to provide at least 25 per cent of their places free to children who had graduated from state elementary schools and passed a qualifying exam. These ‘free-placers’ on the whole were higher academic achievers than the fee-payers and so public investment in them was seen to be both meritocratic *and* democratic, a considerable

(Cambridge, 1996), 231; Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 269.

⁸ This view is shared both by champions of ‘meritocracy’ – e.g. Adrian Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind: Education and Psychology in England, c. 1860–c. 1990* (Cambridge, 1994), or Sanderson, *Educational Opportunity and Social Change* – and by its critics – e.g. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) Education Group, *Unpopular Education: Schooling and Social Democracy in England since 1944* (1981) or Brian Simon, *Education and the Social Order 1940–1990* (1991).

⁹ CCCS, *Unpopular Education*, 44, 93–8; Denis Lawton, *Education and Labour Party Ideologies 1900–2001 and Beyond* (Abingdon, 2005), 23–4, 28; Clyde Chitty, *New Labour and Secondary Education, 1994–2010* (Basingstoke, 2013), 33–4; McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 233–5.

¹⁰ *Secondary Education for All: A Policy for Labour*, ed. for the Education Advisory Committee of the Labour party by R. H. Tawney (London: Labour Party, n.d. (1922)), 28–9, 60.

source of local pride.¹¹ Local authorities were also empowered to provide more free places, either through schools of their own or by buying more places in fee-paying schools; in addition, central government funded its own free places in a group of high-quality grammar schools, the so-called ‘direct grant’ schools. Labour-controlled local authorities spent much of these cash-strapped decades laboriously building up a supply of ‘free’ places to meet a growing demand for secondary education amongst their constituents; Middlesbrough, for example, acquired one existing grammar school and opened two more and by 1938 was providing 75 per cent of these places for free to children who had gone to state primary schools, nine-tenths of them from the lower middle and working classes.¹²

Although what Tawney deplored as ‘the doctrine of selection or of the educational ladder’ extended secondary education only to a small minority (before the war, only 15 per cent entered secondary school), and mostly benefited fee-payers, in places like Middlesbrough the expansion of grammar schools was aimed at poorer children and built up a cohort of labour movement leaders who had reason to be grateful to the grammar schools – figures such as Ellen Wilkinson of Manchester, daughter of a cotton operative, who won scholarships to school and university and ended up as Minister of Education in 1945. As long as the expansion of secondary education meant the expansion of grammar schools, even Tawney celebrated this ‘nationalisation’ of secondary education and the limited gains made by working-class children within it, as an improvement upon the ‘evil’ ‘doctrine of the two systems. . . of separation’.¹³

Labour, therefore, was ambivalent about the grammar school. But so, too, were the Conservatives. Their leadership continued to think of secondary education as elite training rather than elite selection; for them, elite selection happened elsewhere (to a great extent, in heredity), it did not require an artificial ladder of opportunity such as education was meant to provide. They did not use state secondary education much themselves; in 1938, three-quarters of their MPs were privately educated and over two-thirds still in 1950.¹⁴ They had accepted the ladder of opportunity largely for utilitarian reasons – the need to recruit and train more intellectually skilled labour – and partially to rebuild social solidarity after the General

¹¹ Olive Banks, *Parity and Prestige in English Secondary Education: A Study in Educational Sociology* (1955), 65–9, 125–8.

¹² J. E. Floud, A. H. Halsey and F. M. Martin, *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* (1956), 9–14, 38; and see Gillian Sutherland, *Ability, Merit and Measurement: Mental Testing and English Education 1880–1940* (Oxford, 1984), 178–80, on central government’s restraint of this provision, including the requirement for means-testing ‘free’ (now ‘special’) places from 1932.

¹³ *Secondary Education for All*, 23–4, 60, 62, 69.

¹⁴ Simon Haxey, *Tory M.P.* (1941), 179–83; H. G. Nicholas, *The British General Election of 1950* (1951), 45.

Strike, but they were anxious that the adhesion of these new recruits not impair the traditional elite-training functions of grammar schools.¹⁵ The purpose of secondary education was to promote the leadership qualities of a minority, and while some saw the expansion of grammar schools as enriching the social elite with new leadership qualities, others were concerned that the grammar schools were diluting rather than enriching. As late as 1951, the Conservative education spokesperson Florence Horsburgh was insisting that in education ‘the crucial things are the uncommon things . . . if we are to have good education we must look to these differences in abilities . . . rather than try to get children on to one common ground, as one common child . . . I would infinitely rather have privilege than have children all of one sort’.¹⁶

Given this ambivalence on both sides, it is not surprising that the advent of secondary education for all in the Butler Act of 1944 amounted to a compromise. As early as the Hadow Report of 1926, a ‘bipartite’ solution of grammar schools for the minority and a new type of secondary school for the majority, known as the ‘modern’ school, was mooted. Little came of this under the National government but social and political change in wartime accelerated the policy process considerably and in 1944 the Tory Whips, in the words of a future Tory Education Minister,

welcomed the prospect of a bill which (unlike Beveridge) entailed no large immediate economic commitment, commanded a wide range of moderate and progressive all-party support, and could be counted on ‘to keep the parliamentary troops thoroughly occupied, providing endless opportunity for debate, without any fear of breaking up the government’.¹⁷

The Butler Act of 1944 was therefore purposefully vague. It required local authorities to provide free secondary education for all, but did not specify what kind, only requiring that provision be suited to different ‘ages, abilities and aptitudes’. While local authorities were therefore free to experiment with all kinds of secondary education – ‘multilateral’ (what we now know as ‘all-ability’ or comprehensive schools), technical, ‘middle’ schools and the like – the system almost universally adopted was the bipartite one. This permitted local authorities to retain and expand their carefully nurtured grammar schools (now with 100 per cent free places selected purely on ‘merit’) and to cater to the remaining 75 per cent of the age cohort with new, cheaper ‘secondary modern’ schools. This was the model that had been promoted by the Board of Education since Hadow and that was now aggressively promoted by the Coalition government; it was inherited by the Labour government and gingerly defended by Ellen

¹⁵ Lowndes, *Silent Social Revolution*, 93–6; Banks, *Parity and Prestige*, 79–80, 119, 122, 124.

¹⁶ *Hansard*, 5th ser., 491 (1950–1), 226.

¹⁷ Edward Boyle, ‘The Politics of Secondary School Reorganisation: Some Reflections’, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 4, 2 (1972), 28.