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DERBY: THE CRADLE OF THE SOCIETY--Part II

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The Field of Labor

Education in England in the early 19th century was at a low ebb. According to one period historian, school conditions were worse between 1750 and 1840 than at any other time since King Alfred.[1]

> The gentry of Derby acquired their education at the grammar school in St. Peter's churchyard, where they divided their time between poring over the Latin grammar and writhing under the strokes of the birch.[2]

By 1833 only one scholar was left and in 1835 the school was re-organized. But interest in education was growing, and in Derby the people seemed to have a praiseworthy belief in its value.

> One of the greatest changes in the earlier nineteenth century was the growth of a system of education in the town, first in the infant schools and later in the lectures delivered by scientific persons at the Mechanics' Institute founded in 1825 for young people. . . . In 1828 the grocers in the town agreed to close their shops at 8 p.m. to enable their assistants and apprentices to attend the lectures.[3]

There was also a growing taste for music, and musical festivals were becoming a regular institution in the town.

Schools for the sons of tradespeople were on the increase at the time, and here a "more liberal or a 'commercial' education was given." There were even some academies "where young ladies were taught etiquette, deportment and the working of samplers, with only a little arithmetic." Arithmetic seems to have been regarded as "ungenteel" and on one occasion the secretary of an academy sent in her account book incomplete, with the excuse that such books were unsuitable for a lady!

[1] Francis Sydney Marvin, A Century of Hope (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919).

[2] A. W. Davison, Derby: Its Rise and Progress (London: Benrose, 1906), p. 129.

[3] Davison, p. 186.

> But they were proficient with the needle; they could dance a minuet and sing in the chorus at the musical festivals. Dress and fashion offered an ever-absorbing question, and on great occasions, London experts in hair-dressing came to Derby to construct those high headdresses, stuffed with wool, which we see in the portraits of the period.[4]

> A boarding school for young ladies had been opened in 1792 in All Saints Churchyard, where the teaching of English language seems to have been the only mental education offered, the rest of the time being devoted to plain-sewing, muslin work and embroidery. Board, including tea and sugar, was at the same charges as at the boys' school, i.e., one guinea entrance and 13 guineas per annum for board and education, with an extra half-guinea per quarter for the laundry, and each lady was to bring a pair of sheets and four towels.[5]

Poor schools in England before 1833 were organized on the basis of voluntary subscriptions, though the children were also expected to pay a small weekly sum. Because of the scarcity of teachers, Joseph Lancaster, a Quaker, and Andrew Bell, a C. of E. clergyman, independently of each other had introduced into their schools the practice of the older boys teaching the younger ones. This became known as the monitorial system, and was the basis of the pupil-teacher system which developed in the 1840's. "Give me 24 pupils today and I will give you 24 teachers tomorrow," said Bell optimistically.

Sectarianism invaded this system from the start. In 1814 Lancaster's schools, where no dogmatic religion was taught, formed the British and Foreign School Society, while the church schools were supported by the National Society for the Education of the Poor "according to the principles of the Church of England."

In 1833 the first government grant of £20,000

[4] Davison, p. 129.

[5] Davison, p. 184.

to education was divided between these two voluntary societies; this sum was to increase each year as the number of schools increased. Roman Catholic schools, which did not belong to either society, were not eligible for the grant before 1847.

From the early 19th century there had been a number of poor schools in Derby. In 1810 Joseph Lancaster himself visited the town and lectured on the monitorial system. A Lancastrian undenominational school was opened there in 1812 to accommodate 373 children. It was followed immediately by a national or Church of England school, and there were rivalry and fisticuffs between the two. In 1831 a Lancastrian school for girls was set up in Chapel Street; of the 112 scholars on the books about 70 attended daily. The girls were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, plain sewing and knitting for the sum of one penny per week.

There were other poor schools of various kinds in the town, e.g., a person who could read and write might teach some children in his own home.

> One John Pratt opened such a school at Bridge Gate on 12th January 1789, for the instruction of youth in reading, writing, arithmetic. . . . If the children learned all "three R's" they paid 3d. a week; but if they were less ambitious and learned reading only, they paid 2d. a week.[6]

Children from slums too dirty for these schools went to a "ragged school"; a future alderman of Derby told how he learned the alphabet sitting on a block of coal in the coal shed of the British School.

Because of the early age at which children were taken to work full time in the silk mills at Derby, very few remained at school after the age of eleven. To fill the gap in the children's education, night schools were opened and Sunday schools were attached to the churches and chapels. In Derby five to six thousand children attended the Sunday schools.

This was the situation that Mother Connelly and her first three companions found in Derby when they arrived there from the Convent of Mercy in Handsworth. We know the story of that arrival at the new, large, empty house, and how the nuns obtained some cutlery and china with which to eat their dinner from Miss Sing, the sister of the parish priest. Mother

[6] Davison, p. 185.

Maria Joseph Buckle in her memoirs tells us:

> The mission priests, Mr. Sing and Mr. Daniel, were very kind in receiving us and the latter immediately engaged Mother Connelly to take charge of the Poor School for girls and also to instruct some young women for confession. (D 65:30)

Sister Aloysia Walker, one of Mother Connelly's first three companions, tells us in her recollections that "the poor school was waiting for us to go into and was being taken care of by an old-fashioned person who seemed to be always carrying a cane in her hand" (D 10:34-35). As soon as Emily Bowles had recovered from her train journey she took over the school and the nuns "went in in turns."

"It is exceedingly difficult to write anything of this early settlement in Derby," wrote Mother Maria Joseph Buckle. "The notes of Mother Mary Ignatia are a blank and the book kept of passing events has had all the Derby part taken out" (D 65: 37-38). However, we know some of the facts. The poor school numbered about 200 children, although there would rarely if ever be the full number at school together; many were employed as part-timers, and at the age of eleven, as full-time workers in the factories. Mother Connelly wrote to Bishop Ullathorne that they seldom had more than sixty or seventy together. Did these children move from the school they were in to the new convent in Nottingham Road? It seems very unlikely. The records speak of the nuns going into the school in turns, and of Mother Connelly "dusting the Convent parlours, hall and staircase, before going to the schools in which she taught for several hours" (D 73:194). There are no records of any move of the school to the new building. Through the kindness of the Sisters of Mercy now in Derby, we know from their archives that they arrived in 1849 from Kinsall, County Cork, "to take charge of the schools of the town, and establish themselves in a fine, handsome convent prepared for them . . . . Day and night schools were opened immediately . . . and in 1850 an orphanage was commenced in Nottingham Road . . . as there was ample accommodation in the building."

Mother Connelly and her community also used the building for various purposes. They soon had a "very crowded" night school of about a hundred girls (D 73: 177), who learned the catechism as well as sewing,

cutting out work, reading, writing and the rudiments of arithmetic. The school opened at 6 p.m. and closed at 9 p.m.; this span, Mother Connelly notes, "gives us almost as much time with the girls as a half-day school would do" (D 10:110). On two nights in the week they had instructions from the convent chaplain.

On Sundays the children from the Catholic Sunday school also met in the house. "Sunday," wrote Mother Connelly to Lord Shrewsbury, "is a very busy day with two hundred girls to lead to Church for the High Mass after an hour's labour in teaching them, and from two o'clock until four in the afternoon, teaching them to read, etc., etc. Much as we deplore the state of things which renders this necessary, we cannot but acknowledge it is the only way to get hold of the working class--the factory girls" (D 10:31). Happy relations with the girls seem to have been established quite early on. Mother Connelly wrote to Merty in May 1847, "We are making the sweet month of Mary, and have her altar covered with flowers that the factory girls bring us" (D 5:162).

In 1847 there was a Christmas tea-party for the children from the day school and about one hundred turned up. "What a happy thing to be amongst the poor, and they all enjoyed themselves very much," wrote Sister Maria Cottam to her brother.

But Mother Connelly found the expense of running these schools very heavy. She wrote to Lord Shrewsbury December 1846: "With respect to our poor day schools, they are going on very well but we shall never get on without pecuniary assistance" (D 10:31). In 1847 there are entries in the old Derby account books for grants to the parochial school: £100 for March, £50 for May, and in July £62.10s. The books also name various donations. Mother Connelly heads the list with £5; Miss Bowles contributed the same amount; Dr. Wiseman gave £25; Lord Shrewsbury £10, and with the Earl this was just the beginning of help. There are sums entered for the sale of cards, painted apparently by the nuns, perhaps by Sister Maria Cottam. Money is entered from the poor box and from fees paid by retreatants. There is £24.11s from the sale of old silver, and so on.

And so they managed for two years, but it was a hard way and they were very poor. It was when they were at Derby that Mother Connelly was seen patching her old shoes. In 1960, a Miss E. A. Stevens from St. Leonards wrote to Mother Mary Gundred, "I had an old Aunt who knew them in Derby in 1848. She spoke of their great poverty and the things they did to get

money. She knew them as Cardinal Wiseman's nuns" (D 10:148).

There were other aspects of the nuns' apostolate in Derby. In 1847 a boarding school was opened in which the children were joined by "day scholars of the better class" (D 73:177). These girls helped the nuns to teach the catechism in the parish schools on Sunday, "considering it a privilege to share in the labour of love with the few zealous and overworked sisters." Only four boarders are mentioned in the records and the names of only three are given. These three went with the nuns to St. Leonards when they left Derby, but one, Mary Anne Pearce, was taken off the train at Rugby by her father. She returned to Derby where the Sisters of Mercy took over the school in 1849. She entered the congregation and was the superior in 1912 when Mother Mary Agnese Duckett visited Derby to get information about the old days for Mother Mary Francis Bellasis who was writing the life of Mother Connelly. The other two children continued their journey to St. Leonards; they were Mr. Jones's two "bluebottles." Both entered the Society; one was Mother Lucy Ignatia Payne who died young; the other was Mother Teresa Xavier Boulger. The number of day children who joined the Derby school is not mentioned. The only names given are those of ten or eleven children who took part in two plays that were produced there. One parochial school pupil was Marie Tracey who became Mother Catherine Tracy and who described herself as "our Mother's first child" (D 68:36).

The Catholic Directory for 1848 included an advertisement for St. Mary's Convent, Derby, where the girls were to be given a solid education "which would best enable them to fulfil their office in society" as well as "instructing them in the details of domestic life and in such arts as would be practically useful in the service of the Church." They were to be taught English, French, writing, arithmetic, history, grammar, singing and the principles of church music, drawing, plain needlework and every kind of embroidery, tracing, point-lace stitch, etc., together with the cutting out and making of vestments--and all this for £25 per annum. Piano was an extra. Fortunately perhaps for this large program, the only holiday was from 17th June to 26th August. But what a change from the restricted curriculum quoted earlier. Dr. Wiseman was doubtful about teaching French to middle-class girls, as the "present French literature is so wicked." He suggested a little Church Latin instead. However, French was certainly

included in Mother Connelly's schools; they must have come to terms about it, especially as Wiseman agreed that most French literature was already translated into English (D 10:69). Pierce Connelly, in an article in the Catholic Herald (USA), speaks of music as "a part of all their religious instruction" (D 5: 153). Another "innovation" was the introduction of dramatic performances which were generally considered "worldly" and "dangerous" in those days. But Mother Connelly believed that school plays helped to develop character and to stimulate creativity in making scenery and costumes. At least two plays were produced in the convent school during the Derby years, Beauty and the Beast and Bluebeard the Second.

In a letter to Father Lythgoe, S.J., 28 September 1846 (D 10:14), Dr. Wiseman had added "training school mistresses" to the aims of the new institute. This was one of the crying "wants of the age." There were no training colleges for teachers in the early 19th century. Dr. James Kay-Shuttleworth established the first at Battersea in 1839-40,[7] and soon introduced the pupil-teacher system. According to this, schools which received a favorable report from their inspectors could be recognized as suitable for the training of some of their pupils as pupil-teachers. At the age of thirteen these children started a five-year apprenticeship at the end of which they did a Queen's Scholarship examination. If successful they were awarded an exhibition to the value of £20 or £25 at one of the training colleges which were now being built. Schools with the pupil-teacher system were at first called normal schools, and government grants were given to help them, though here again there were difficulties for convents and monastic schools.

The administration of these grants to Catholic schools was in the hands of the Catholic Poor Schools Committee, letters from which (April 1848) record among the first dozen Catholic schools applying for apprenticeship "Derby Girls School--Principal Manager: Mrs. Connelly, St. Mary's Convent, Derby" (D 10:83).

The inspector in Derby, Scott Nasmyth Stokes, wrote to Bishop Ullathorne, who had taken Dr. Wiseman's place in the Midlands, in support of Mother Connelly's

7 "The existing system of public education rests wholly on Kay's methods and principles. Trained teachers, public inspection, the pupil-teacher system, the combination of religious with secular instruction and with liberty of conscience, and the union of local and public contributions were all provided for or foreseen by him." (DNB, v. 10)

application:

> It will be in the recollection of your lordship that the Bishops in Synod assembled, have approved of Derby Convent as a training school for Mistresses. That convent, as far as buildings go, possesses all the requisites for a Normal School, and its position is perhaps as central and as accessible as any spot in England. It would accommodate sixty young women readily, and affords precisely the case we want to take to Government. . . . It must be years before we could take this position in respect to the Training School for Male Teachers. . . . But with regard to female teachers the case is different. . . . We are anxious to go before Government at once boldly and openly and say, "Here is our Normal School. It is conducted by Religious. Give us for it the help you have led us to expect.
> (D 10:122d, passim)

The result was that five female teachers were placed in training with the community of the Holy Child Jesus then settled in Derby, and this after Mother Connelly had spent only eighteen months in England.

Withdrawal from Derby

But the growing financial difficulties and the consequent strained relationships with the parish priest, Mr. Sing, brought the Derby experiment to an end. Bishop Ullathorne visited the convent in August 1848. He expressed himself delighted with the religious spirit of the nuns and novices; he was greatly pleased to see them sitting on the floor at recreation when there was a scarcity of chairs, and he apparently enjoyed the charade on his name which Sister Emily Bowles produced for his entertainment. The difficulties with Mr. Sing which had developed after the appearance as chaplain of the Italian, Dr. Asperti, were too great, however, to be solved and Dr. Wiseman wrote to Mother Connelly on 10th November 1848:

> From /Ullathorne's/ letter to me . . . I conclude that his mind is made up:
> 1. Not to allow a government grant to you . . . in fact this day I learned it would not be granted.
> 2. Not to acknowledge you as a Normal School, and
> 3. To advise you to leave unless the whole debt can be paid off at once. (D 10:124)

And so in December the packing-up process began, a retreat was given to the nuns by Dr. Asperti, and on 21st December the last party left Derby for St. Leonards.

Mother Mary Francis Bellasis wrote of Derby, "It is hard to give up a work which is proving a failure, but still harder a work which is proving a success" (D 73:282). And in spite of the withdrawal Derby was in many ways a great success. It was there that Mother Connelly tried out so many of her spiritual and educational ideas. She then transferred them to St. Leonards so that they became an essential part of the Holy Child apostolate and tradition.

"Within two years and two months, twenty-one postulants were received and the novices clothed with the religious habit. This was considered striking at the time in a Protestant country" (D 73:178). Among them were names which were to become famous in the Society--Sisters Stanislaus McDermott, Theresa Hanson, Frances Magdalen Miller, Aloysia Walker, Austin Beard, Maria Cottam, Joseph Spratt, Maria Joseph Buckle, Lucy Woolley, Emily Bowles, Helen Green, Martha Wilkinson, as well as Sister Mary Ignatia Bridges, who left Derby as a lady boarder, the two "blue bottles," and Marie Tracey left behind in Derby.[8]

It was, of course, while they were at Derby that the troubles with Pierce Connelly began and he retired to the continent with the children, a terrible sorrow to Cornelia which "never left her." And yet "the bright cheerful spirit of our dearest Mother was the life of the recreations of the Sisters," wrote Sister Austin (D 68:15). "In the Convent itself all was bright and peaceful" (D 73:197), and Mother Connelly herself wrote to Bishop Ullathorne in August 1848 after he had decided that they could not stay there, "the Community is going on religiously and in great peace, notwithstanding our exterior troubles" (D 10: 109-110).

In 1867 Mother Connelly visited America, and she and Sister Aloysia, who was then living at the Sharon convent, revived their memories of the early days at Derby. "She loved Derby Convent very much and was delighted to hear me speak of it," says Sister in her recollections (D 10:40). Derby is surely a place that Holy Child Sisters must like to dwell upon as the origin of so much that we enjoy and appreciate today.

[8] See above p. 39

Cornelia

What kind of person was Cornelia Connelly when she came into the industrial Midlands of England to begin a new educational institute, and what preparation had she had in her life in America and Rome to prepare her for this work? This last question has been dealt with in an earlier SOURCE (#3, Summer, 1972, pp. 3-21) by Sister Radegunde Flaxman in part of the "Apostolate Studies" series.

I think that Cornelia was typical of the Americans of the early national period who imbibed the optimism and enterprise demanded for shaping a new nation. She was also briefly involved in that quintessential American historical experience, life on the frontier. Though Natchez afforded her all the comforts of a wealthy cotton capital, it also put her in touch with the frontier which lay just across the mighty Mississippi--the "moving frontier" that did so much to mould the American character. It was more than a century before the frontier journey ended at the Pacific, and in the meantime there was opportunity for all to find work and success in the new lands they were entering. The men and women who made the journey were, therefore, optimistic, courageous, full of the spirit of enterprise, taking difficulties in their stride. And if ever anybody needed these qualities, it was Cornelia Connelly in 1846, when she arrived in Derby with no resources, no religious habit, no previous experience of life in a very anti-Catholic town in industrial England, to establish a new religious congregation with no rules of enclosure. And she kept this spirit to the end of her life. In 1875, four years before her death, she wrote to her nieces Bella and Lizzie Bowen:

> There is almost a rush /in England/ for California and all the splendid country between the Mississippi and the Pacific. I wonder if our dear boys have the American spirit and energy to stir up for the new countries? If I were with you I should rouse up from Texas and not get swamped there. Knowledge is power & there is no use in going to sleep when active energy would make us more useful and happy. (CC 1:114A)

How true and how typical. She was never "swamped." When after two years Derby had to close, she moved on to St. Leonards, and by 1865 to London, Liverpool, Preston and Blackpool. The "moving frontier" was moving in England.