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HOME EDUCATION IN NINETEENTH CENTURY IRELAND: THE ROLE AND STATUS OF THE GOVERNESS

Deirdre Raftery

Introduction

As noted by Luddy (1992, p.34), "an aspect of [Irish] education which has received little attention is that of governessing". This is in contrast to other forms of unofficial nineteenth century education. Both Dowling (1968) and Coolahan (1981) note that during the early decades of the nineteenth century most Irish children received their education outside the official system, in the widespread unofficial system of payschools or "hedge schools". A consequence of the unofficial nature of this education was that it did not leave comprehensive records of itself. There is equally a paucity of information on the home education provided by governesses in Irish homes during the nineteenth century. They formed a significant proportion of all those employed in teaching: the *Census of Ireland, 1841* indicates that they made up almost ten per cent of the total (male and female) teaching force. However, like hedge schoolmasters, they left few records of their work and any evaluation of their contribution to education relies, perforce, upon a close examination of a small range of sources. Papers of a few institutions for governesses are extant, and they are included in certain census returns. They are also mentioned in some nineteenth century newspapers and journals, and feature in autobiographies of some Anglo-Irish writers. In addition, there were links between the Governesses Association of Ireland (GAI), Alexandra College, Dublin, and the movement for higher education for women. This paper examines the profile of the profession, and the work of governesses, through a detailed analysis of available sources.

The Profile of the Profession

As Raftery (1997, p.133) notes, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that systematic efforts were made to make teaching a viable occupation for women, but records indicate that women had worked as tutors and governesses at least since the fifth century AD. In documenting the positions women occupied in learning from the Renaissance period to the nineteenth century, Raftery (1997) illustrates that the emergence of governessing as a "respectable" form of paid employment for women in the nineteenth century was crucially linked to the successful campaign for women's access to university education.

Governesses at work in Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century were most likely to be employed in the homes of the upper and upper-middle classes, and therefore were dependent on a small, and largely Protestant, section of the population for employment. Census of Ireland Returns (1841, 1861) indicate that from the 1840s until the early 1860s, these women formed almost ten per cent of the total teaching force and the majority was Protestant. Census returns for 1861, for example, show that some seventy-four per cent of Irish governesses were Protestant. However, by the last decades of the century, many Catholic women were earning a living in this way, and Protestant women no longer dominated the profession. This is indicated in the *Census of Ireland, 1881,* which records that of a total female teaching force of 12,846, some 5,316 women were governesses and private teachers, of which fifty-four per cent were Catholic. The profession expanded with daughters of the rising middle-classes: Catholic girls who had been educated within the National and Intermediate systems. These changes were noted in 1887 by the Central Association of Irish Schoolmistresses (CAISM), which had been formed in 1882 by members of the staff of Alexandra College and the governing committee of the Queen's Institute. Breathnach (1987, p.62) notes that the CAISM acted "as a means of communication between schoolteachers and other ladies interested in education" and promoted higher education for women. It published articles on female education and the work of women teachers in its Annual Reports, of which a comprehensive set is held at Trinity College, Dublin. Luddy (1995, pp.147-151) documents the 1887 Annual Report of the CAISM, which included an article titled "The

pay and position of teachers". It charted the changing profile of the profession, with reference both to accumulated CAISM information and to the *Census of Ireland, 1881.* The article commented that private positions were being filled by "girls who some years ago only thought of going into service, [or] some trade ... [who were] now encouraged by the good education they get ... in the National Schools or through the help of the Intermediate Board" (Luddy, p.148).

Status and Security

Peterson (1980, p.15) has illustrated that in England the nineteenth century governesses occupied a position of "status incongruence": she "was a lady, and therefore not a servant, but she was an employee and therefore not of equal status with the wife or daughters of the house;" in Ireland, a similar situation obtained. The tensions that such a situation created were complicated by the fact that governesses seem not to have been in a position to negotiate the terms of their employment, and were often exploited by the very families with whom they were obliged to live. The average salary for a resident governess in Ireland in the middle of the century was between £40 and £60, from which deductions were made to cover the cost of laundry and candles. In the *Annual Report of the Central Association for Irish Schoolmistresses, 1887* (Luddy, 1995, p.21-22) it is recorded that nursery governesses were often paid as little as £20 per annum, while daily governesses often earned as little as £1 per month. The latter group were the most vulnerable members of the profession, as they had to provide their own accommodation and food.

Governesses were particularly vulnerable once they were too old to expect employment. Those who had been residential could suddenly find themselves homeless. The *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Governesses Home* (1851, p.1) noted that because most governesses were single women, they were not taken into Widow's Houses, and as they were not servants they could not look for shelter at the servants asylums. However, research indicates that they were inmates at some asylums for single women, and some charitable institutions. One such asylum was the Asylum for Aged Governesses (later the Governesses Home), established in 1838 at Marlborough Street (and later relocated to Harcourt Terrace, Dublin).[1] It was founded by a small, voluntary committee of Protestant men and

women. The heretofore-unexamined MS Register of the Governesses Home (1839-1900, unpaginated) indicates that, by the end of the century, the home had admitted 175 inmates, whose ages ranged from thirty-one to eighty years, and the majority of inmates were between fifty and sixty years of age. Few of them left to resume employment, although nineteen women were expelled for "improper conduct" such as being quarrelsome or uncooperative, and some who became very ill were removed to the Hospital for Destitute Incurables.

The "Lady as Teacher" in Nineteenth Century Ireland

Governessing was one of the few "respectable" forms of employment for middle class women in nineteenth century Ireland. As Daly (1981), Luddy (1992) and Hearn (1993) have indicated, domestic service and agriculture were the greatest employers of women at that time, recruiting from the working classes. For middle and upper-middle class women, managing cottage industries such as embroidery and knitting, or engaging in private teaching was more attractive. Luddy (1992, p.32) notes that Lady Aberdeen's Irish Home Industries Association, formed in 1887, attempted to unify all the local cottage industries under the patronage of "ladies". In a similar vein, the Governesses Association of Ireland was established in 1869 to promote the education of "ladies" as teachers (Parkes and O'Connor, pp.13-14). To secure employment, it was more important that a governess was a "lady" than a trained teacher. The CAISM *Annual Report, 1887* (Luddy, pp.148-149) recorded a typical demand: "[the governess] was to be a perfect lady, cultivated and refined, salary £20", and noted that "nursery governesses (were) to have the education, manners, and dress of ladies".

The education such women could provide depended very much on what they had, themselves, been taught. Autobiographies can contribute something to the endeavour to piece together some knowledge of their work. Prominent writers such as Edith Somerville (1929) and Frances Power Cobbe (1894) described their governesses and the content of the education that these women provided. Both Somerville and Cobbe were taught by "overseas governesses" (English, French and German women). The overseas governess was something of a status symbol, reflecting not only the wealth and sophistication of the employer but providing superior language teaching. There was no

guarantee, however, that the teaching ability of an overseas governess was greater than that of a "resident" or "daily" Irish governess, and many simply obliged their pupils to memorise lists of facts. In the autobiographical *Wheel Tracks* (1929, p.34), Somerville recalled having "to learn by heart the Church Catechism, Rules of Grammar ... [and] dates of the Kings of England". Text books used in Irish homes were similar to those used by governesses in England, and included Richmal Mangall's widely read *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions for the Use of Young People* (1828). Outdated by the middle of the century, it would have compared unfavourably with the textbooks of the National Board, which were being used widely in National schools. Governesses were expected to have some musical accomplishments and ability at drawing. In *A Practical Education* (1801, p.141-142) Richard and Maria Edgeworth deplored this emphasis on "lady-like accomplishments".

The education provided by governesses reflected not only their own limited education, but also their lack of any form of teacher training. Luddy (1995, pp. 121-122) documents the programme of education offered by the Seminary for Young Persons Designed to be Governesses (Cork). It trained girls of fourteen years of age and older, providing that they had no other means of support. Such organisations were more concerned with securing respectable employment for their trainees than with preparing them to teach. The Governesses Association of Ireland (GAI), established in 1869, differed from training seminaries in that it was committed to providing both a solid academic education and some teaching practice. Established by a number of prominent middle-class Dublin Protestants, it was largely the creation of Anne Jellicoe who had founded the Irish Society for Promoting the Training and Employment of Educated Women (later the Queen's Institute) in 1861. Jellicoe had hoped that the Queen's Institute would become involved in the training of governesses but this idea was not popular with the Board. As documented by Parkes and O'Connor (1983, pp.12-13), Jellicoe, together with Archbishop Trench, went on to found Alexandra College, which opened in 1866. Eventually in 1869, Jellicoe formed the GAI to "promote the education of ladies as teachers". It set about raising scholarships to Alexandra College for "persons intending to become governesses". Its committee wrote in 1884:

> It seems to be generally supposed that, without any preparation, every woman is fit to teach, if she is fit for nothing else. Hence the large number of persons, wholly unqualified, labouring as governesses on miserable wages ... and the low tone of the education which is the rule in private houses.[2]

The GAI aimed to provide a library and an agency for governesses, and two years of training "in the best methods of imparting instruction".[3] Trainees gained teaching experience by assisting at Alexandra School, and were awarded a certificate of proficiency upon successful completion of their training. As only a handful of scholarships were raised, the GAI only facilitated the training of a couple of young women each year. By the turn of the century the function of the GAI was eclipsed by the growth in formal teacher training, and - as noted below - women teachers increasingly worked in schools rather than in home education.

The Demise of the Profession

The profession of governessing quickly sank into oblivion at the end of the nineteenth century. A number of factors may have contributed to this change. For example, employment in formal education (such as national schools and second level schools) was better paid, than employment as a private teacher. Coolahan (1981, p.25) noted that The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Primary Education 1868-70 (Powis) indicated that forty-three per cent of the teaching force was female, with female principals receiving £34 per annum while assistant female teachers earned £19 per annum. Following the recommendations of the Powis commission, a system of payment by results was introduced in Irish national schools (1872). Hyland (1987, p.129) indicated the rate at which female teachers could increase their basic annual income, depending on the results of their pupils in annual examinations. However, there was no basic rate of pay for governesses, and neither was it possible to predict income for a given year. As noted earlier, daily governesses were poorly paid and their hours varied depending on the needs, and whims, of their employers.

Other factors which contributed to the demise of the profession were the passing of the Intermediate Education Act, 1878, and the widening of employment opportunities for middle-class girls. These developments made school education the preferred choice for parents of the class of girls who traditionally had been taught at home. O'Connor (1987, pp. 44-50) has noted the growth in the demand for day and boarding schools for girls in the decades immediately following the passing of the Intermediate Education Act, 1878. In addition, O'Connor (1987, p.50) charted the growth in career opportunities for Irish girls in the period 1880-1910, commenting that these opportunities gave girls "and their parents a continuing impetus to strive for a recognised educational level and thereby ensured the full acceptance of the examination system." For young women, a good education was the passport into a career in the civil service, where salaries far exceeded those of governesses. Female telegraphists could expect to start at £50 per annum, rising to £80, while female supervisors at the General Post Office (GPO) sorting office in 1889 earned annual salaries of £85 to £105 (O'Connor, p.53). Clerkships also provided attractive employment for educated girls, and by the end of the century almost 1000 women were employed as commercial clerks, - a number which would rise to 7,849 within a decade (O'Connor, p.54). As formal education and examination results became an index of suitability for well-paid employment, governesses became redundant. In addition, there was little incentive for girls to swell the ranks of a profession that could provide neither status nor security.

Conclusion

Perhaps less is known about governesses than about any other branch of the teaching profession at work in nineteenth century Ireland. They left few records of themselves, and as a consequence their work as educators has not been noted in standard studies of Irish education. Though they accounted for ten per cent of the total teaching force in the early 1840s, they were completely unofficial and were not represented by an organising body. Drawn principally from the middle and rising middle classes, they were usually young women with some academic education and some skill in accomplishments, such as music and drawing. Few had any form of training or certification, and rates of pay varied widely. Their employment was always insecure, and many turned to charitable institutions in their old age.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Ireland had experienced the growth of the national school system, and the Intermediate examination system. In line with developments in England at the same time, it was recognised that girls should be educated in schools and that their education should approximate more closely to that of boys, and the governess became a victim of much needed educational change. However, it must be recognised that the profession of governessing played an important role, not only in supplying home education but also in providing "respectable" paid work for women of the middle ranks at a time when almost all forms of employment were closed to them.

ENDNOTES

1. The archives of the Harcourt Home (formerly the Governesses Home) were consulted with the kind permission of the Trustees of Harcourt Home. These archives are not catalogued, and for the purpose of this paper references are made by name and date only.
2. MS Bell, ALS, Alexandra College Archives. The co-operation of the Principal and Board of Alexandra College is gratefully acknowledged.
3. Governesses Association of Ireland to Executor of Mr.J.B. Ball, 22 January 1884, ALS Alexandra College Archives.

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