

The Political Dimension of the Education of the Poor in the National Society's Anglican Schools,  
1811-1837<sup>1</sup>  
Nicholas Dixon

In 1820, the Whig statesman Henry Brougham stated in Parliament that the clergy of the established church were ‘not only teachers of religion, but, in the eye of the law, they were teachers generally’. In unsuccessfully proposing a comprehensive system of state-supported parish schools, he spoke of ‘the infinite benefit that would arise from having the constant, the daily superintendence of such a character as a well-educated and pious English churchman’.<sup>2</sup> That such a statement could be made by a rising star of the party of Fox and Holland, soon to denounce the chapter of Durham in a much-publicised libel trial, demonstrates the lack of controversy that attached to the proposition that the clergy should supervise the education of the English populace at this time. This proposition accorded with a general reluctance on the part of parliamentarians to sanction any state-maintained schooling and had a strong precedent in the Church’s canonical obligation to catechise children.<sup>3</sup> Even the Unitarian radical John Wade, in his *Extraordinary Black Book* of 1831, conceded that ‘[p]ublic education is a subject that appears to have peculiar claims on the attention of the clergy’, before castigating them for having ‘generally neglected’ their ‘duty’ as ‘instructors of the people’.<sup>4</sup>

Wade’s charge owed more to polemic than fact. The foundation by clergy, statesmen and philanthropists in 1811 of the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church throughout England and Wales marked a watershed in popular elementary education. This institution existed for the establishment, improvement and homogenisation of Anglican daily schools under clerical supervision for children whose parents

---

<sup>1</sup> The research upon which this article is based was funded by an AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership Studentship (grant number: 1653413), supported by Pembroke College, Cambridge. I am most grateful to Andrew Thompson and Mary Clare Martin for their comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> *Hansard*, 2nd series, 2: 73-4 (28 June 1828).

<sup>3</sup> Neil Smelser, *Social Paralysis and Social Change: British Working-Class Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA, 1991), 66-75; W. M. Jacob, *The Clerical Profession in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1680-1840* (Oxford, 2007), 236.

<sup>4</sup> [John Wade], *The Extraordinary Black Book* (London, 1831), 6.

could not afford to pay for their education. Although a not inconsiderable number of Anglican charity schools already existed and remained formally independent of the National Society, it was the principal motive force behind an Anglican educational revival of unprecedented scale.<sup>5</sup> By 1816, every diocese in England bar three had a local arm of the National Society.<sup>6</sup> In 1832, there were around 13,000 Anglican charitable schools throughout England and Wales, educating almost a million children.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, non-Anglican schools accounted for a relatively small share of educational provision. A parliamentary enquiry of 1833 found that only 2.2% of daily schools in England were dissenting institutions, accounting for 3.9% of scholars.<sup>8</sup>

These statistics indicate that the clergy of the Church of England were widely shouldering the educational responsibilities which even Whigs and radicals conceded to them. The National Society's role in English society and politics was correspondingly vast. This article aims to demonstrate that the society's operations at a local level afforded the Church a powerful political platform, and played a major role in the politicisation of the English working class. This line of argument represents, in several respects, a departure from existing scholarship. National Schools

---

<sup>5</sup> On the early history of the National Society, see H. J. Burgess, *Enterprise in Education: The Story of the Work of the Established Church in the Education of the People prior to 1870* (London, 1958); Akira Iwashita, ‘Politics, State and Church: Forming the National Society 1805–c.1818’, *History of Education*, 47 (2018), 1–17. This article focuses on the society’s activities in England. For the society’s work in Wales, see H. G. Williams, “‘Leaning Suitable to the Situation of the Poorest Classes’: The National Society and Wales, 1811–1839”, *Welsh History Review*, 19 (1999), 452–5.

<sup>6</sup> *Second Annual Report of the National Society, for promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church* (London, 1814), 23–177; M. Smith, ‘Henry Ryder: A Charge delivered to the Clergy of the Diocese of Gloucester in the year 1816’ in *idem.* and S. Taylor, eds., *Evangelicalism in the Church of England c. 1790–c. 1890: A Miscellany* (Woodbridge, 2004), 75. The three exceptions were London, Rochester and Oxford, all of which had extensive provision of National Schools under non-diocesan auspices.

<sup>7</sup> *Twenty-first Annual Report of the National Society, for promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church throughout England and Wales* (London, 1832), 105–8, 123. This statistic resulted from a survey sent to parishes throughout England and Wales, in which approximately 83% of parishes completed returns. The figures for the remaining 17% were estimated on the basis of averages.

<sup>8</sup> *Education Enquiry: Abstract of the Answers and Returns made pursuant to an Address to the House of Commons, dated 24th May 1833* (London, 1835), 1208. The proportion for Sunday schools was rather different as the Church did not prioritise these, but nevertheless around two thirds of English Sunday schools were Anglican, accounting for 55% of scholars.

have long been regarded as largely ineffectual and barely distinguished from the free daily schools of the British and Foreign School Society (BFSS), the National Society's principal rival, on account of similarities in teaching method. Frank Smith, writing in 1931, delivered a withering verdict on both societies' schools: 'Their emphasis on religious teaching (and in the Church schools on sectarian teaching), their meagre curriculum with reading as the chief accomplishment, their mechanical methods applied by unskilled assistants, and their cheapness and poverty, conspired to fossilise the elementary school'.<sup>9</sup> More recent studies have been less dismissive of the efforts of Anglican educationalists, but have remained focused on their contribution to education *per se*. Two institutional histories of the National Society draw attention to its achievements, relying largely on annual reports and the deliberations of the society's central committee in London.<sup>10</sup> Since the 1970s, a series of local case studies have also served to qualify conventionally negative assessments of the National Society, demonstrating its capacity to educate effectively.<sup>11</sup>

However, the political aspect of the National Society, though frequently remarked upon by contemporary observers, remains little explored. The epigraph of C. K. Francis Brown's 1942 study of *The Church's Part in Education 1833-1941*, a quotation from William Cowper-Temple, declared, 'In England popular education originated with no statesman, and was nurtured for no political end.' Instead, in Brown's view, the provision of schools for the poor was for 'sociological and religious

---

<sup>9</sup> Frank Smith, *A History of English Elementary Education 1760-1902* (London, 1931), 80. Cf. J. W. Adamson, *English Education 1798-1902* (Cambridge, 1930), 24-31; H. C. Barnard, *A History of English Education from 1760* (2nd edn, London, 1961), 57; Mary Sturt, *The Education of the People: A History of Primary Education in England and Wales in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1967), 34.

<sup>10</sup> Burgess, *Enterprise in Education*; Lois Loudon, *Distinctive and Inclusive: The National Society and Church of England Schools 1811-2011* (London, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Sanderson, 'The National and British School Societies in Lancashire 1803-1839: The Roots of Anglican Supremacy in English education' in T. G. Cook, ed., *Local Studies and the History of Education* (London, 1972), 1-36; Pamela Silver and Harold Silver, *The Education of the Poor: The History of a National School 1824-1974* (London, 1974); Marjorie Cruickshank, 'The Anglican Revival and Education: A Study of School Expansion in the Potteries 1830-1850', *North Staffordshire Journal of Field Studies*, 20 (1984 for 1980), 19-31; Mary Clare Martin, 'Church, School and Locality: Revisiting the Historiography of "State" and "Religious" Educational Infrastructures in England and Wales, 1780-1870', *Paedagogica Historica* 49 (2013), 70-81.

reasons'.<sup>12</sup> Assessments of the National Society's purpose have remained largely in the realm of sociology, with occasional allusions to its desire to check political sedition.<sup>13</sup> Neil Smelser, for instance, maintains a sharp distinction between the political and religious contexts for the development of working-class education.<sup>14</sup> The only study to address the political aspect of such instruction at length is Philip McCann's case study of schools in early nineteenth-century Spitalfields, in which this aspect is presented through the lens of sociological theories of 'socialization'. McCann sees the political dimension of the Anglican schools as paternalistic: 'Father, magistrate, monarch, deity, all Anglican and many other children who attended school at this period had their attention drawn to this omnipresent hierarchy, and few can fail to have absorbed some of its social significance.'<sup>15</sup>

However, the National Society's political dimension was much more varied and complex than this suggests, as appears when it is analysed in relation to contemporary political developments. It is with this dimension of the society's work, as opposed to the nature of its social function or role in furthering literacy, that this article is primarily concerned. Besides the society's controversial claim respecting what constituted 'national' education, political agendas were evident in three main areas: the National Schools' teaching, rituals and use as venues for political activism. This article will discuss each of these by reference to a variety of geographically dispersed examples, before considering their broader effect. It will do so principally by reference to contemporary newspaper

---

<sup>12</sup> C. K. Francis Brown, *The Church's Part in Education 1833-1941 with Special Reference to the Work of the National Society* (London, 1942), title page, 3.

<sup>13</sup> John Lawson and Harold Silver, *A Social History of Education in England* (London, 1973), 243, 271; Thomas Laqueur, 'Working-Class Demand and the Growth of English Elementary Education, 1750-1850' in Lawrence Stone (ed.), *Schooling and Society: Studies in the History of Education* (Baltimore, MD, 1976), 192-205, at 198; D. G. Paz, *The Politics of Working-Class Education in Britain, 1830-50* (Manchester, 1980), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Smelser, *Social Paralysis and Social Change*, 26-32, 70-90.

<sup>15</sup> Philip McCann, 'Popular Education, Socialization and Social Control: Spitalfields 1812-1824' in *idem.* (ed), *Popular Education and Socialization in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1977), 1-40, at 25. McCann also observed, however, that the contributions in this volume 'do not provide the basis for generalizations about popular education in the nineteenth century': *idem.*, 'Editor's Introduction' in *ibid.*, xii.

accounts.<sup>16</sup> Such sources are to be treated with caution on account of their frequently partisan agendas, which could extend to education. In general, Tory-leaning newspapers celebrated the achievements of the National Society through fulsome descriptions of its commemorations, while Whig-leaning newspapers drew attention to the controversies in which the managers of National Schools became involved. But when considered together, items in newspapers of both persuasions present a convincingly mixed picture of the successes and difficulties of National Schools. Both the positive and negative press received by National Schools may have been susceptible to hyperbole, but the supposition that newspaper accounts are inadmissible as historical evidence in this context lacks weight. The majority of the accounts presented here are of a primarily descriptive nature, concerning public events which would have been familiar to each newspaper's readership, and therefore unlikely to be wildly inaccurate. Furthermore, newspapers often give a more detailed and colourful view of the activities of the National Society than appears from more prosaic (but equally subjective) sources such as National Schools' annual reports and minute books, though these are nonetheless also important and complementary sources. In using newspapers as a basis for examining the early years of the National Society, a worthwhile and heretofore largely untapped avenue of enquiry is opened.

The political dimension of the National Society's operations was most obviously evident in its nomenclature. The creation of a system of 'national' education along specifically Anglican lines, and without state oversight, constituted a provocative intervention in the contemporary debate about the relationship between church and nation state. Established at a time of significant Anglican revival,

---

<sup>16</sup> The newspaper accounts were gathered by searching for references to the National Society and National Schools in newspapers digitised by the British Library in the British Newspaper Archive, <<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>>. This online database currently incorporates 147 English newspapers published during the period from 1811 and 1837, from all regions of England and of a variety of political persuasions. It constitutes the largest and broadest sample accessible through digital resources of English local newspapers from this period.

the National Society was the first society in Britain to use the appellation of ‘national’.<sup>17</sup> As Joanna Innes has argued, its foundation represented a bold assertion of the Church of England’s capacity to represent the nation at large.<sup>18</sup> Such exclusivity irked dissenters, one of whom asked at a meeting in Lincoln in 1812, ‘How can that be called a “National” School which is founded on a partial view of religions[?]’<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the Church itself encompassed influential supporters of non-denominational education such as Henry Bathurst, Bishop of Norwich, and Sydney Smith.<sup>20</sup> Opponents of Anglican exclusivity generally supported the BFSS, which offered non-denominational religious education for the poor, but failed to match its rival’s financial and numerical strength.<sup>21</sup>

The teaching offered by the National Society was premised on the belief, proclaimed in its initial prospectus, that ‘the National Religion should be made the first and chief thing taught to the Poor, according to the excellent Liturgy and Catechism provided by our Church for that purpose’.<sup>22</sup> The teaching methods used in the schools were drawn from *Elements of Tuition* (1808) by Andrew Bell, a Church of England clergyman from Scotland who had experimented with new modes of instruction as chaplain of an orphanage in Madras. Bell stipulated that schools should be divided into classes led by the more able pupils, who were made ‘monitors’, the whole being overseen by a single

---

<sup>17</sup> Bob Tennant, *Corporate Holiness: Pulpit Preaching and the Church of England Missionary Societies, 1760-1870* (Oxford, 2013), 152. On the revival of Anglicanism in this period, see Arthur Burns, *The Diocesan Revival in the Church of England, c.1800–1870* (Oxford, 1999); Stewart Jay Brown, *The National Churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland 1801-46* (Oxford, 2001), 62-92.

<sup>18</sup> Joanna Innes, ‘L’«éducation nationale» dans les îles Britanniques, 1765-1815: Variations britanniques et irlandaises sur un thème européen’, *Annales*, 65 (2010), 1103-4.

<sup>19</sup> *Stamford Mercury*, 31 January 1812, 4. The complaint that the National Society’s title was a misnomer because of its religious exclusivity persisted throughout the period. See e.g. *Windsor and Eton Express*, 2 August 1818, 2; *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 13 April 1831, 2; *Leeds Mercury*, 19 October 1833, 8; *Taunton Courier*, 27 January 1836, 9; *Yorkshire Gazette*, 22 October 1836, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Bathurst, *Memoirs of the late Dr. Henry Bathurst, Lord Bishop of Norwich* (2 vols, London, 1837), II, 69-70; Sydney Smith, ‘Trimmer and Lancaster’ (1806) in *idem.*, *Works* (3 vols, London, 1848), I, 157-66.

<sup>21</sup> *Education Enquiry*, 1338; Henry Bryan Binns, *A Century of Education: Being the Centenary History of the British and Foreign School Society 1808-1908* (London, 1908), 55-7, 81, 103, 123-4.

<sup>22</sup> London, Church of England Record Centre, National Society General Committee minute book, 16 October 1811, NS/2/2/1/1, f. 1<sup>r</sup>.

schoolmaster and a superintending visitor.<sup>23</sup> Such ‘monitorial’ methods were also used by the BFSS, in a permutation devised by the Quaker schoolmaster Joseph Lancaster.<sup>24</sup> But there the similarity ended. Whereas the BFSS taught children biblical passages without any doctrinal gloss, central to Bell’s scheme was ‘moral and religious Instruction’ based on the Anglican Catechism, which was learned by rote.<sup>25</sup> Besides the inculcation of religious doctrine, the duty of civil obedience was strongly promoted, as is evident in a dialogue from the *National School Magazine* of 1824:

Who placed our king over us?

God.

Prove this from Scripture.

Rom. xiii. 1. “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers; for there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained by God.”

Can a good Christian then, be a disloyal subject?

No; for the Bible says, “Fear God, honour the King.”<sup>26</sup>

Teaching personnel were both male and female and generally came from ‘the middle class of society’.<sup>27</sup> They were carefully selected for their adherence to the established church, with dissenters and Roman Catholics generally, though not uniformly, excluded.<sup>28</sup> Where the teachers’ political

---

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Bell, *The Madras School, or Elements of Tuition* (London, 1808), 15-17.

<sup>24</sup> Binns, *Century of Education*, 16-18.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-6; Bell, *Madras School*, 84-8.

<sup>26</sup> *The National School Magazine*, 15 June 1824, 73-4.

<sup>27</sup> *Report from Select Committee on the State of Education* (London, 1834), 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. On the training of National schoolteachers, see R. W. Rich, *The Training of Teachers in England and Wales during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1933), 1-25. For exclusions, see e.g. Winchester, Hampshire Record Office, 128M84/2, pp. 44-5, Hampshire Society for the Education of the Infant Poor minute book, 18 April 1816; *ibid.*, p. 89, 1 December 1817. For isolated instances of non-Anglican teachers, see London, Church of England Record Centre, NS/2/2/1/3, f. 108<sup>r</sup>, National Society General Committee minute book, 5 May 1819; Brighton, East Sussex Record

opinions are recorded, these were consistently of a Tory or Conservative hue. William Lancaster, master of the National School of Market Rasen in Lincolnshire, was noted in 1821 for his ‘attachment to Church & State in the good old fashioned way’.<sup>29</sup> At Warrington in 1836, it was reported that a National schoolmaster was the secretary of a local Conservative politician.<sup>30</sup>

The political content of National Society teaching was articulated at length at a dinner of Bath Church of England Lay Association in 1835 by the longstanding master of the town’s National School, a Mr Browning. He explained that ‘our motto is “the Bible and the crown – church and king – and may they never be separated.”’ Browning further stated, ‘We certainly do not instruct the children that they will be better sons, brothers, husbands, or fathers by becoming members of Political Unions; though that might be of great use in making them discontented, and *not* to do their duty in that state of life which it should please their Maker to call them.’ Nor did Browning intend to teach ‘a blind obedience’. Instead, he aimed to defend ‘the Protestant church’ by ‘handing down to our children the blessings that have descended to us from the piety and wisdom of our forefathers’.<sup>31</sup>

National Schools developed a number of rituals which reinforced this instruction. If most church services in this period were devoid of elaborate ceremonial, a National Society observance was seemingly incomplete without a procession of dignitaries and children, the carrying of colourful banners, the singing of hymns or patriotic songs and a dinner of roast beef and plum pudding. The frequency of these ceremonies challenges the conventional assumption that the Church of England was characterised by a relative absence of ritual in the early nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, it

---

Office, PAR 255/25/1/1, p. 271, Brighton National Schools minute book, 22 July 1835; Robert Southey and Charles Southey, *Life of Rev. Andrew Bell* (3 vols, London, 1844), 3: 448.

<sup>29</sup> Lincoln, Lincolnshire Archives, John Robinson to Earl Brownlow, 3 March 1821, BNLW/3/10/1/10/2.

<sup>30</sup> Laqueur, ‘English Elementary Education’, 199-200.

<sup>31</sup> *Bath Chronicle*, 3 December 1835, 4.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. David Cannadine, ‘The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the “Invention of Tradition”, c. 1820-1977’ in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 101-64, at 115; F. C. Mather, ‘Georgian

demonstrates the centrality of a specifically Anglican agenda to many loyalist rituals, qualifying Linda Colley's argument that loyalists' use of religious terminology was a case of extravagant appropriation reflecting 'the spread of secular religion'.<sup>33</sup>

The monarchy, which in the person of George IV had supported the National Society from its foundation, provided a focal point for many of the occasions under discussion.<sup>34</sup> At Ipswich on the King's birthday in 1812, the National schoolroom was festooned with 'a wreath of laurel, encircling "God save the King" handsomely gilt', while at an examination held on the Prince Regent's birthday in 1817 at Wendover National School, '[t]he festivities of the day were concluded by all the children drinking the health of his ROYAL HIGHNESS THE PRINCE REGENT, the firm friend and patron of the NATIONAL SOCIETY.'<sup>35</sup>

On occasion, royal observances assumed a positively antiquated character. From 1818, it was an annual custom for two boys and two girls from the Westminster National Schools selected for 'good conduct' to participate in the Royal Maundy ceremony.<sup>36</sup> For the 1820 anniversary of Charles II's restoration, schoolchildren in York attended the commemorative service prescribed in the Prayer Book at the cathedral and heard a preacher expound the text, 'My son, fear thou the Lord and the King, and meddle not with them that are given to change.'<sup>37</sup> As late as 1825, the schools under the

---

Churchmanship Reconsidered: Some Variations in Anglican Public Worship 1714-1830', *JEH*, 36 (1985), 255-83, at 261-2.

<sup>33</sup> Linda Colley, 'The Apotheosis of George III: Loyalty, Royalty and the British Nation, 1760-1820', *Past & Present* 102 (1984), 94-129, at 120-21.

<sup>34</sup> On monarchical patronage of the National Society in this period, see Nicholas Dixon, 'Church and Monarchy in England, 1811-1837' (unpublished MPhil dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2015), 81-5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ipswich Journal*, 13 June 1812, 2; *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal*, 22 August 1817, 3. See also the account of the royal birthday festivities at Canterbury in *Kentish Weekly Post*, 6 June 1817, 4.

<sup>36</sup> *Evening Mail*, 20 March 1818, 4; *Morning Post*, 20 April 1821, 3; 5 April 1822, 3; 28 March 1823, 1; *London Courier*, 16 April 1824, 2; *Bell's Life in London*, 3 April 1825, 3; *Morning Post*, 24 March 1826, 2; 13 April 1827, 3; 4 April 1828, 3; 17 April 1829, 3; 9 April 1830, 3; 1 April 1831, 3; W. J. Thoms, *The Book of the Court* (London, 1838), 314-5.

<sup>37</sup> *Yorkshire Gazette*, 2 June 1820, 3.

auspices of the National Society in Rotherhithe were marking ‘King Charles the First’s Martyrdom’, in addition to the Restoration and 5 November, with holidays.<sup>38</sup>

Yet the supporters of the schools were also perfectly capable of inventing new observances as circumstances demanded. One of the most elaborate spectacles recorded was a procession of National schoolboys in Norwich marking the peace of 1814:

The head boys preceded the whole, carrying a banner with “NATIONAL SCHOOL” inscribed upon it. Next followed a representation of a Bible and Crown, with the appropriate quotation of Scripture, “FEAR GOD: HONOUR THE KING.” After which came the Book of Common Prayer, over which was written in large characters, “Train up a Child in the Way he should go.”<sup>39</sup>

If the ties between monarch and subject were emphasised by such rituals, they also called to mind obligations to more immediate patrons. Sir John and Lady Shelley, benefactors of Maresfield National School in Sussex, gave an annual dinner on New Year’s Day for the children of this institution in the servants’ hall of their country seat at which they distributed prizes and clothes.<sup>40</sup> Bonds of this kind were further expressed in the schoolchildren’s participation in events of family significance. At Knaresborough in 1824, 600 children processed from the National schoolroom ‘headed by a band of music’ to celebrate the birth of a son and heir to local worthy Sir William Slingsby, giving ‘three cheers for the family of Slingsby’.<sup>41</sup> In 1832, the committee of Runcorn National School decided that, in recognition of ‘the invariable attention paid by Sir Richard Brooke Baronet and his family to this Institution’, the schoolchildren would attend the wedding of his

<sup>38</sup> *An Address to the Parents of Children, admitted into the Rotherhithe Charity and Amicable Society Schools, with the Rules and Orders to be Observed* (London, [1825]), 9.

<sup>39</sup> *Norfolk Chronicle*, 9 July 1814, 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Sussex Advertiser*, 4 January 1819, 3; *Public Ledger*, 4 January 1821, 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Yorkshire Gazette*, 18 September 1824, 2.

daughter.<sup>42</sup> While such rituals would have required the co-operation of the schoolchildren's parents, they clearly also served a hierarchical social purpose. A Windsor clergyman named Allen suggested in 1835 that the foundation of a National School would 'if he might so express himself, be productive of great political advantages' in counteracting the 'disposition among the lower classes to regard not with proper feelings the higher class.'<sup>43</sup>

However, the encouragement of social deference was far from being the sole, or even the principal, priority of the organisers of National Society observances. More partisan political agendas were evident at the dinners of patrons and managers of the schools. The school anniversary at Thorpe-le-Soken, Essex, in 1814 was essentially a celebration of Napoleon's recent defeat. A toast was given to King Louis XVIII of France and a version of 'God save the King' was performed which included the lines:

If Statesmen dead can know,

What passes here below,

Pitt! how thy heart must glow,

God save the King.<sup>44</sup>

Such politicking was still evident in the 1830s. Shortly after the general election of 1835, a dinner to mark the anniversary of Deptford National School was presided over by Wolverley Attwood, the unsuccessful Conservative candidate for Greenwich. Attwood was eager to show magnanimity in defeat, telling diners that '[o]n all occasions like the present every feeling of political difference should be banished' and toasting the health of his victorious Whig opponents. This ploy fell flat,

---

<sup>42</sup> Chester, Cheshire Archives, P95/3516/1, Runcorn National School minute book, 17 May 1832; *The Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1844, 205.

<sup>43</sup> *Windsor and Eton Express*, 5 December 1835, 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Ipswich Journal*, 7 May 1814, 2.

however, as the toast was given ‘in any thing but a cordial manner, a great portion of the company being silent, and the cheers of a very faint description.’<sup>45</sup>

Anglican attempts to disclaim political partisanship therefore usually rang hollow. The early nineteenth century was a period in which the Church was undergoing a thorough politicisation, as the clergy and laity increasingly attempted to make their voices heard in national and local public debate. Political divisions consequently assumed a far greater significance than any variations in churchmanship. The National Schools, as a prominent sphere of Anglican activity, could hardly fail to be affected by this development, and soon became venues for political activism that was as multifarious as it was widespread. Especially formative in this regard was the Queen Caroline Affair of 1820, which split the Church between the factions of George IV and his estranged wife Queen Caroline.<sup>46</sup> Some supporters of the National Society acted in accordance with its loyalist ethos. In Lambeth, a committee of seventeen met in private at the National School and issued a ‘loyal declaration’ on behalf of the parish’s 60,000 inhabitants.<sup>47</sup> At a meeting in Lancaster to frame a similar address, one speaker alluded to the ‘exhibition’ of ‘that kind of education which combines piety to God with loyalty to the King’ at the town’s National School.<sup>48</sup> A chaplain of the Archbishop of Canterbury, John William Whittaker, preached a sermon to aid the funds of the National School at Newington, Surrey, and was ‘particularly thanked for some raps wh[ich] I gave to the Radicals, & the proselytes of Carlisle [sic] & Hone.’<sup>49</sup>

However, it was also perfectly possible for National Schools to be co-opted for more subversive demonstrations. The National School at Alford, Lincolnshire, was lit in celebration of the dropping

---

<sup>45</sup> *Kentish Mercury*, 4 April 1835, 4. Attwood made another appearance at the school’s anniversary in 1837 following the success of his second attempt at being elected an MP for Greenwich: *West Kent Guardian*, 28 October 1837, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Dixon, ‘Church and Monarchy’, 49-52.

<sup>47</sup> *Evening Mail*, 25 December 1820, 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Westmorland Gazette*, 30 December 1820, 412.

<sup>49</sup> Cambridge, St John’s College Library, Whittaker Papers, 2/16, John William Whittaker to Sarah Whittaker, [7 May 1821]. Quoted by permission of the Master and Fellows of St John’s College, Cambridge. Whittaker was referring to the radical publishers Richard Carlile and William Hone.

of the bill of pains and penalties which would have deprived Caroline of her rights as Queen had it been enacted.<sup>50</sup> In Limehouse, subscribers to the National School voted to allow their schoolroom to be used for a meeting to frame a supportive address to the Queen. This meeting was interrupted by the school's treasurer, Christopher Richardson, who protested that 'there were many Subscribers to the Charity who did not reside in the parish, and who might, perhaps, withdraw their patronage if political Meetings were suffered there.' A Mr Fitch responded that the schoolroom 'could not be devoted to a more laudable purpose than the support of innocence against injustice and oppression. [...] [I]f the worthy Speaker thought otherwise, why did he not muster her Majesty's enemies, and oppose the proceedings?' At this point Richardson departed, and the address was carried.<sup>51</sup>

National Schools were further drawn into political debate by the proliferation of petitions against Catholic emancipation in the late 1820s. At Coventry in 1827, an anti-emancipation petition lay for signature 'for some days' at the city's National School.<sup>52</sup> An especially bitter dispute occurred in Norwich in 1829. The Whig *Norwich Mercury* sparked controversy when it reported that 'the Boys of one of the National Schools were marched up in procession ... to a house near Fye-bridge, where all who could write set their signatures to the Petition against Catholic Emancipation preparing in this city.'<sup>53</sup> Henry Bathurst, Archdeacon of Norwich, asked that a 'satisfactory and public contradiction' of this report be given. Accordingly, a denial of the allegation was published by the trustees of the school. It then emerged that eight National schoolboys had signed the petition '*in a body*', but apparently without official encouragement.<sup>54</sup> In this instance, attendance at a National School appears to have been politically formative. In response, Bathurst argued that 'for children to take such a part in public matters, and especially where the subscribers to the charity are of different

---

<sup>50</sup> *Stamford Mercury*, 24 November 1820, 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 9 December 1820, 3. The National schoolroom in Greenwich was also used for a meeting to address the Queen: *Bath Chronicle*, 17 August 1820, 2.

<sup>52</sup> *Northampton Mercury*, 29 December 1827, 4. The schoolroom was also the venue of a meeting to frame a clerical anti-emancipation petition in the same year: *Coventry Herald*, 29 June 1827, 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Norwich Mercury*, 31 January 1829, 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 February 1829, 2.

opinions as to the subject in question, is not only absurd in itself, but prejudicial to the character and interests of the institutions in which they are educated.<sup>55</sup> The affair gained national attention when the Duke of Sussex, patron of the BFSS, repeated a variant of the original report of the *Mercury* in the House of Lords, claiming that the schoolboys had been dismissed by their master early to sign the petition.<sup>56</sup> A Reading newspaper predicted that anti-emancipationists there would ‘attempt something of a “hole and corner” petition … and by the aid of a few “old ladies in breeches” and the little boys and girls of the National Schools obtain some signatures’.<sup>57</sup>

Although it remained possible for reformist gatherings to be held at National Schools, their overtly political function tended in the 1830s to assume a fixed form in their use as venues for meetings of working class supporters of the nascent Conservative party, especially in industrial Lancashire.<sup>58</sup> At Chorley in 1836, the formation of an ‘Operative Conservative Association’ at a National School elicited a protest from local manufacturers.<sup>59</sup> In Liverpool, members of the Tradesmen’s and Operative Conservative associations processed at the laying of the foundation stone of an Anglican school.<sup>60</sup> The following year, at a dinner in Wigan National School, local Conservative MP John Hodson Kearsley was feted by ‘operatives’, while at Rochdale ‘a conservative tea party’ was held in the National School.<sup>61</sup> A dinner of the Pilkington Operative Conservative Association held in a National schoolroom was the occasion of a speech by a curate named Sandford, who remarked to cheers that ‘he trusted we should never look forward to the time

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 February 1829, 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Hansard*, 2nd series, 20: 940-1 (10 March 1829).

<sup>57</sup> *Reading Mercury*, 9 February 1829, 3.

<sup>58</sup> For instances of reformist gatherings, see e.g. *Sheffield Independent*, 19 March 1831, 2; *Maidstone Journal*, 22 May 1832, 1; *Morning Advertiser*, 5 December 1834, 1. For an early example of a Conservative dinner, see *Morning Post*, 2 February 1833, 2. In Canterbury, the clergy used National schoolrooms for meetings to frame their responses to Church reforms: *Kentish Gazette*, 29 March 1833, 3; 10 January 1837, 2.

<sup>59</sup> *Evening Standard*, 24 November 1836, 1.

<sup>60</sup> *Morning Post*, 7 September 1836, 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Durham County Advertiser*, 6 January 1837, 4; *Blackburn Standard*, 24 May 1837, 2.

when children would be taken from the care of the clergy in the national schools'.<sup>62</sup> It is not possible to determine how many members of these associations had attended National Schools, but such a correlation seems highly probable.

Godfrey Faussett, in urging the claims of the National Society on the University of Oxford in 1811, had preached that 'the defence of our Ecclesiastical Establishment is the defence of our Political Constitution'. Countering systems of non-denominational education was, in his view, 'manifestly the interest of the ecclesiastic and the statesman'.<sup>63</sup> During the succeeding quarter of a century, the National Society demonstrated its political potential. Although the principal aim of National Schools was to engender belief in Anglican doctrine and loyalty to the sovereign, the events of the 1820s and '30s precipitated a broadening of this agenda to encompass the promotion of deference to the social hierarchy, opposition to Catholic emancipation and support for Peel's Conservative Party. Given the number of National Schools and the way in which they functioned as a point of contact between the poor and the Church, the significance of their foray into the political sphere can hardly be underestimated.

In his recent comparative study of education and state formation, Andy Green suggests, 'The stultifying condescension of the Anglican schools, deriving from the ritual conservative belief in rank and status, no doubt did much to alienate the working class from education.'<sup>64</sup> In this schema, also discernible in the writings of Brian Simon and Thomas Laqueur, National Schools were a

---

<sup>62</sup> *Bolton Chronicle*, 25 November 1837, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Godfrey Faussett, *A Sermon on the Necessity of Educating the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church: preached before the University of Oxford, at St. Mary's, on Sunday, Dec. 1, 1811* (Oxford, 1811), 18-19. Cf. Herbert Marsh, *The National Religion the Foundation of National Education: A Sermon preached in the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, London: on Thursday, June 13, 1811* (London, 1811), 37-40; T. H. Lowe, *A Sermon, preached in the Parish Church of Tenbury, for the benefit of the National School, established in that Town* (Ludlow, 1817), 14-16; Daniel Wilson, *The National Schools a National Blessing: A Sermon preached at Christ Church, Middlesex, on Sunday Evening, March 28, 1819* (London, 1819), 32-3.

<sup>64</sup> Andy Green, *Education and State Formation: Europe, East Asia and the USA*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke, 2013), 224.

generally ineffective form of social control promoted by an unpopular Anglican elite.<sup>65</sup> The evidence brought forward here suggests an alternative interpretation. Not only did National Schools increase educational provision for the poor to an unprecedented degree; they also did so in a way which, far from alienating the working class, brought about a closer engagement with Anglican ideals.

This was strongly demonstrated by a survey conducted by the National Society in 1836, in which local committees were asked to provide information regarding ‘the character and general conduct of young persons brought up in National schools’. The published results were no propaganda exercise; the society admitted that in some respects the information collected was ‘exceedingly defective’ and even detailed two National schoolboys’ convictions for crimes.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, relatively reliable information was obtained regarding 24,466 scholars in 382 places.<sup>67</sup> The vast majority of this sample of pupils were said to be of good character.<sup>68</sup> Of 741 pupils educated in three schools in County Durham, it was claimed that all were ‘regular in attendance at Church, and useful members of Society. They are distinguished by their good conduct, and are, in many instances … religious characters.’<sup>69</sup> Other responses remarked on noticeable increases in church attendance, the lack of criminality among former pupils and the number of pupils who had become teachers.<sup>70</sup>

The effect of such success for the Church of England was to render its political position more secure. A significant proportion of the labouring population were now becoming accustomed at an early age to a religiously inflected conception of nationhood, in which belonging to the established church and obeying the monarch were the twin cornerstones of a common identity. This was already apparent in 1833, when criticism of the National Society appeared in the *Bath Herald* newspaper. In

---

<sup>65</sup> Brian Simon, *The Two Nations and the Educational Structure 1780-1870* (London, 1974), 132-3; Laqueur, ‘English Elementary Education’, 199.

<sup>66</sup> *Twenty-fifth Annual Report of the National Society, for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church throughout England and Wales* (London, 1836), 61, 86.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-90.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>70</sup> See e.g. *ibid.*, 72, 76, 79, 80, 82, 86.

response, an address containing ‘*spontaneous testimony*’ from around 70 former pupils of Bath National School was presented to its committee:

*From the extensive connection which we enjoy with those who were once our schoolfellows, and from information derived from others, there exists not among them, as far as we know, one solitary instance of a departure from the faith ... We do most heartily and conscientiously express our firm and unshaken belief in those doctrines and precepts which were so indefatigably inculcated upon us by our excellent Master; and we hope that, in the practice of those duties, our employers would bear testimony to our zeal and industry.*<sup>71</sup>

The National Society laid broad and permanent foundations for the maintenance and extension of the Church of England’s influence. This was primarily achieved through three means: the dissemination of a homogenous method for instructing the poor in Anglican doctrine and civil obedience, the development of rituals supportive of this agenda and the use of National Schools as venues for Anglican political activism. Even when considered in isolation from other areas of clerical activity, National Schools reveal the shakiness of the foundations upon which the notion of pre-Victorian Anglican lethargy was to be constructed later in the century.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the success of the National Society’s project surely reflects something of the dominance which the Church exercised among a sizeable section of the English populace, despite the best efforts of dissenters and radicals. The case of elementary education suggests the possibility that there was a wider Anglican socio-political dominance in England that, contrary to most standard accounts, may have persisted beyond the alleged displacement of the Church’s political hegemony in consequence of the

---

<sup>71</sup> *Bath Chronicle*, 19 December 1833, 3.

<sup>72</sup> See e.g. George Biber, *Bishop Blomfield and his Times: An Historical Sketch* (London, 1857), 1-25; William Nassau Molesworth, *History of the Church of England from 1660* (London, 1881), 308-9; R. W. Church, *The Oxford Movement: Twelve Years, 1833-1845* (London, 1891), 1-19.

legislative reforms of 1828-32. Further research concerning the National Society's operations beyond 1837 and Anglican associational activity throughout the nineteenth century will shed light on this larger question. Whatever the outcome of such enquiries, the contribution of National Schools to the mass politicisation of the English populace in the early part of the nineteenth century is an historical factor which warrants recognition.