Field Lane Ragged School

Introduction

'Ragged Schools' were funded by charitable donations and provided free basic education to children of poor families in the 1800s. Teachers were often local volunteers, using make-shift locations such as railway arches, stables or lofts. Reading, writing, arithmetic and Bible studies were taught. In 1844 the Ragged School Union was formed, chaired by the social reformer Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury. Over the next eight years over 200 Schools were established in Britain supported by wealthy donors.

Field Lane Ragged School in Clerkenwell was founded in 1841 by Andrew Provan, a missionary, who worked in this crowded and squalid area. The School was squeezed into a back room of Caroline Court and moved a few weeks later to Saffron Hill, described by Charles Dickens as "pitifully struggling for life, under every disadvantage. It was held in a low-roofed den, in a sickening atmosphere, in the midst of taint and dirt and pestilence: with all the deadly sins let loose, howling and shrieking at the doors." The area around Faringdon Road was a notorious criminal slum. Charles Dickens set gangmaster Fagin's den there.

"The teachers knew little of their office; the pupils with an evil sharpness, found them out, got the better of them, denied them, made blasphemous answers to scriptural questions, sang, fought, danced, robbed each other; seemed possessed by legions of devils. The place was stormed and carried over and over again; the lights were blown out, the books strewn in the gutters, and the female scholars carried off triumphantly to their old wickedness." It was little wonder that the School met with great hostility and within a year it moved to nearby West Smithfield. About 15 children attended each Sunday morning and some 60 children in the afternoon. A similar sized class was held on Thursday evenings. The sum total of resources apart from chairs and forms were 6 New Testaments, 36 reading books and 6 hymn books."

The Daily News March 13, 1852 - Charles Dickens

"I offer no apology for entreating the attention of the readers of *The Daily News* to an effort which has been making for some three years and a half, and which is making now, to introduce among the most miserable and neglected outcasts in London, some knowledge of the commonest principles of morality and religion; to commence their recognition as immortal human creatures, before the Gaol Chaplain becomes their only schoolmaster; to suggest to Society that its duty to this wretched throng, foredoomed to crime and punishment, rightfully begins at some distance from the police office; and that the careless maintenance from year to year, in this, the capital city of the world, of a vast hopeless nursery of ignorance, misery and vice; a breeding place for the hulks and jails: is horrible to contemplate.

This attempt is being made in certain of the most obscure and squalid parts of the Metropolis, where rooms are opened, at night, for the gratuitous instruction of all comers, children or adults, under the title of RAGGED SCHOOLS. The name implies the purpose. They who are too ragged, wretched, filthy, and forlorn, to enter any other place: who could gain admission into no charity school, and who would be driven from any church door; are invited to come in here,

and find some people not depraved, willing to teach them something, and show them some sympathy, and stretch a hand out, which is not the iron hand of Law, for their correction.

Before I describe a visit of my own to a Ragged School, and urge the readers of this letter for God's sake to visit one themselves, and think of it (which is my main object), let me say, that I know the prisons of London well; that I have visited the largest of them more times than I could count; and that the children in them are enough to break the heart and hope of any man. I have never taken a foreigner or a stranger of any kind to one of these establishments but I have seen him so moved at sight of the child offenders, and so affected by the contemplation of their utter renouncement and desolation outside the prison walls, that he has been as little able to disguise his emotion, as if some great grief had suddenly burst upon him.

Mr. Chesterton and Lieutenant Tracey (than whom more intelligent and humane Governors of Prisons it would be hard, if not impossible, to find) know perfectly well that these children pass and repass through the prisons all their lives; that they are never taught; that the first distinctions between right and wrong are, from their cradles, perfectly confounded and perverted in their minds; that they come of untaught parents, and will give birth to another untaught generation; that in exact proportion to their natural abilities, is the extent and scope of their depravity; and that there is no escape or chance for them in any ordinary revolution of human affairs. Happily, there are schools in these prisons now.

If any readers doubt how ignorant the children are, let them visit those schools and see them at their tasks, and hear how much they knew when they were sent there. If they would know the produce of this seed, let them see a class of men and boys together, at their books (as I have seen them in the House of Correction for this county of Middlesex), and mark how painfully the full grown felons toil at the very shape and form of letters; their ignorance being so confirmed and solid. The contrast of this labour in the men, with the less blunted quickness of the boys; the latent shame and sense of degradation struggling through their dull attempts at infant lessons; and the universal eagerness to learn, impress me, in this passing retrospect, more painfully than I can tell.

For the instruction, and as a first step in the reformation, of such unhappy beings, the Ragged Schools were founded. I was first attracted to the subject, and indeed was first made conscious of their existence, about two years ago, or more, by seeing an advertisement in the papers dated from West Street, Saffron Hill, stating "That a room had been opened and supported in that wretched neighbourhood for upwards of twelve months, where religious instruction had been imparted to the poor", and explaining in a few words what was meant by Ragged Schools as a generic term, including, then, four or five similar places of instruction. I wrote to the masters of this particular school to make some further inquiries, and went myself soon afterwards.

It was a hot summer night; and the air of Field Lane and Saffron Hill was not improved by such weather, nor were the people in those streets very sober or honest company. Being unacquainted with the exact locality of the school, I was fain to make some inquiries about it. These were very jocosely received in general; but everybody knew where it was, and gave the

right direction to it. The prevailing idea among the loungers (the greater part of them the very sweepings of the streets and station houses) seemed to be, that the teachers were quixotic, and the school upon the whole "a lark". But there was certainly a kind of rough respect for the intention, and (as I have said) nobody denied the school or its whereabouts, or refused assistance in directing to it.

It consisted at that time of either two or three--I forget which-miserable rooms, upstairs in a miserable house. In the best of these, the pupils in the female school were being taught to read and write; and though there were among the number, many wretched creatures steeped in degradation to the lips, they were tolerably quiet, and listened with apparent earnestness and patience to their instructors. The appearance of this room was sad and melancholy, of course--how could it be otherwise!--but, on the whole, encouraging.

The close, low chamber at the back, in which the boys were crowded, was so foul and stifling as to be, at first, almost insupportable. But its moral aspect was so far worse than its physical, that this was soon forgotten. Huddled together on a bench about the room, and shown out by some flaring candles stuck against the walls, were a crowd of boys, varying from mere infants to young men; sellers of fruit, herbs, lucifer-matches, flints; sleepers under the dry arches of bridges; young thieves and beggars--with nothing natural to youth about them: with nothing frank, ingenuous, or pleasant in their faces; low-browed, vicious, cunning, wicked; abandoned of all help but this; speeding downward to destruction; and UNUTTERABLY IGNORANT.

This, Reader, was one room as full as it could hold; but these were only grains in sample of a Multitude that are perpetually sifting through these schools; in sample of a Multitude who had within them once, and perhaps have now, the elements of men as good as you or I, and maybe infinitely better; in sample of a Multitude among whose doomed and sinful ranks (oh, think of this, and think of them!) the child of any man upon this earth, however lofty his degree, must, as by Destiny and Fate, be found, if, at its birth, it were consigned to such an infancy and nurture, as these fallen creatures had!

This was the Class I saw at the Ragged School. They could not be trusted with books; they could only be instructed orally; they were difficult of reduction to anything like attention, obedience, or decent behaviour; their benighted ignorance in reference to the Deity, or to any social duty (how could they guess at any social duty, being so discarded by all social teachers but the gaoler and the hangman!) was terrible to see. Yet, even here, and among these, something had been done already. The Ragged School was of recent date and very poor; but he had inculcated some association with the name of the Almighty, which was not an oath, and had taught them to look forward in a hymn (they sang it) to another life, which would correct the miseries and woes of this.

The new exposition I found in this Ragged School, of the frightful neglect by the State of those whom it punishes so constantly, and whom it might, as easily and less expensively, instruct and save; together with the sight I had seen there, in the heart of London; haunted me, and finally impelled me to an endeavour to bring these Institutions under the notice of the Government; with some faint hope that the vastness of the question would supersede the Theology of the schools, and that the Bench of Bishops might adjust the latter question, after some small grant

had been conceded. I made the attempt; and have heard no more of the subject from that hour.

The perusal of an advertisement in yesterday's paper, announcing a lecture on the Ragged Schools last night, has led me into these remarks. I might easily have given them another form; but I address this letter to you, in the hope that some few readers in whom I have awakened an interest, as a writer of fiction, may be, by that means, attracted to the subject, who might otherwise, unintentionally, pass it over.

I have no desire to praise the system pursued in the Ragged Schools; which is necessarily very imperfect, if indeed there be one. So far as I have any means of judging of what is taught there, I should individually object to it, as not being sufficiently secular, and as presenting too many religious mysteries and difficulties, to minds not sufficiently prepared for their reception. But I should very imperfectly discharge in myself the duty I wish to urge and impress on others, if I allowed any such doubt of mine to interfere with my appreciation of the efforts of these teachers, or my true wish to promote them by any slight means in my power. Irritating topics, of all kinds, are equally far removed from my purpose and intention.

But, I adjure those excellent persons who aid, munificently, in the building of New Churches, to think of these Ragged Schools; to reflect whether some portion of their rich endowments might not be spared for such a purpose; to contemplate, calmly, the necessity of beginning at the beginning; to consider for themselves where the Christian Religion most needs and most suggests immediate help and illustration; and not to decide on any theory or hearsay, but to go themselves into the Prisons and the Ragged Schools, and form their own conclusions. They will be shocked, pained, and repelled, by much that they learn there; but nothing they can learn will be one-thousandth part so shocking, painful, and repulsive, as the continuance for one year more of these things as they have been for too many years already.

Anticipating that some of the more prominent facts connected with the history of the Ragged Schools, may become known to the readers of *The Daily News* through your account of the lecture in question, I abstain (though in possession of some such information) from pursuing the question further, at this time. But if I should see occasion, I will take leave to return to it."

British Library – article on ragged schools by Imogen Lee

Without compulsory schooling only a fraction of this population received formal education, contributing to an illiterate workforce and a rising prison population. Imogen Lee comments, "As Britain sought to expand as its Empire and the domestic population grew, the image of London as an Imperial Capital, made up of poor, unschooled and (due to the 1832 Reform Act), recently enfranchised individuals, was a visceral muse to the anxieties of Victorian writers and their readers. Without more schools, 'the capital city of the world,' feared Dickens, would become, 'a vast hopeless nursery of ignorance, misery and vice; a breeding place for the hulks and jails.'

Dickens's fears for the uneducated masses permeated his work, but so too did his hope for charity and his faith in schooling. In 1846, eight years after he imagined piles of children punctuating London's landscape, Dickens recalled a visit to Field Lane Ragged School, which

opened in 1842 near to the very location in which he set Fagin's fictional den of thieves. The school consisted of, 'two or three…miserable rooms, upstairs in a miserable house,' where children 'huddled together on a bench,' while, 'some flaring candles [were] stuck against the walls.' Not to be 'trusted with books' the children were taught 'orally' by a voluntary teacher, 'to look forward in a hymn…to another life, which would correct the miseries and woes of this'.

Field Lane's humble setting belied its grander aims. The school was part of a new and growing educational movement, which was 'willing to teach' children for free, who were, 'too ragged, wretched, filthy, and forlorn, to enter any other place'. Prior to 1870, under Britain's laissez-faire, fee-paying education system schools usually hand picked their students according to academic ability, wealth, or religion. By contrast Ragged Schools could be attended by anyone and showed 'some sympathy' especially to children and adults, 'who could gain admission into no charity school, and who would be driven from any church door.'

By the 1850s Field Lane consisted of a day school which taught reading, writing, counting and the Bible; two night schools, one for 'vagrant and destitute adults,' another for boys who were employed during the day; as well as classes in shoemaking and tailoring for boys, and sewing classes for girls. Alongside its academic and vocational lessons, Field Lane fed and clothed its students, while also running a night refuge, lessons on parenting for mothers and a Bible school at weekends. Indeed, while the school accepted a child of any faith or background, evangelical Christianity was at the heart of Ragged schooling, with the aim being to teach poor mothers how to clothe and bring up their offspring, to teach fathers their duties to their families and children their duty to their parents, to teach above all things that true wisdom is true religion and true religion supreme love to God.'

The school's origins

Field Lane was the inspiration of the London City Mission, founded by Scottish missionary-worker David Nasmith. He asked his fellow missionaries to bring 'an acquaintance with salvation, through our Lord Jesus Christ' by providing free education and 'doing…good by every means in your power' for London's growing population of the 'destitute poor.'

Dickens visited Field Lane just before the Ragged School Union was formed and just after the publication of the reports from the Children's Employment Commission, which the Earl of Shaftsbury had also instigated in 1840. These parliamentary reports detailed the horror of child labour in Britain. The first was published in 1842 and described the low pay, long hours and dangerous work conditions experienced by children working in mines and collieries. The second report was published the following year and provided interviews with hundreds of children who worked in various trades and manufactures.

The reports captured Dickens's imagination, giving urgency to his interest in child poverty, and this urgency was compounded by the children he encountered in Field Lane. The students of the Ragged school, who ranged, 'from mere infants to young men; sellers of fruit, herbs, lucifer-matches, flints; sleepers under the dry arches of bridges; young thieves and beggars,' gave faces to the interviews that filled the Commission's reports. The hardship faced by these children, and the religious and economic illiteracy the Ragged Schools attempted to stem,

would in turn inspire the child-like figures of Want and Ignorance that clung to the Ghost of Christmas Future in Dickens's 1843 novella *A Christmas Carol*.

Ragged children and Ragged jobs

Ragged Schools by no means received unconditional public support. Dickens himself had, 'no desire to praise the system', believing it was not 'sufficiently secular…presenting too many religious mysteries and difficulties to minds not sufficiently prepared for their reception'.

In 1850, the journalist Henry Mayhew highlighted the ineffectual nature of the schools by arguing that juvenile delinquency rates were rising. In his 1851 investigative work, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Mayhew described the lives of a group of Mudlarks who traipsed up and down the banks of the Thames looking for coal, copper, rope and any other scrap they might be able to sell.

"These were the children for whom Ragged Schools had been established, but instead, "hese poor creatures…may be seen of all ages, from mere childhood to positive decrepitude, crawling among the barges at the various wharfs … with but few exceptions, these people are dull, and apparently stupid; this is observable particularly among the boys and girls, who, when engaged in searching the mud, hold but little converse one with another."

Few of these children had been to church or school, and for those who had it was more, 'because other boys go there, than from any desire to learn'. As one boy commented, he did not think he could learn even if he tried 'ever so much'. Indeed, due to their acts of 'petty theft' brought about by hunger, the most common institution these children had encountered was the House of Correction. For Mayhew, Mudlarks were both young and old, not just in age but in experience. Poverty had stunted their development, while institutions, like schools and prisons, had left them weary of their own achievements."

Concerned that their schools did not induce a 'desire to learn', and that families saw the classes on offer as irrelevant, the Ragged School Union began to establish 'brigades' for their male pupils in 1857. These extra-curricular groups provided certified jobs in street vending or shoe shining, with a proportion of the boys' earnings being placed in a personal bank account. Yet, as the historian Lionel Rose has shown, many children already worked in such industries outside of Ragged Schools. As a result, boys from the brigades were vulnerable to ridicule outside the classroom from children who chose not to join. Despite hostility from the streets, however, the brigades were approved by the Home Office and the Metropolitan Police, who saw them as encouraging discipline and work-skills among children who might otherwise enter a life of crime.

Limited success

Until the end of the 19th century (actually 1870), schooling remained a mainly voluntary affair, but under the 1857 Industrial Schools Act any Ragged School prepared to be inspected by the Home Office and provide boarding for children in exchange for Government grants, had the power to compel children to attend lessons. The Act, and its subsequent 1860 amendment, enabled magistrates to send children as young as seven or as old as 14, who had been found in the company of criminals or were vagrant and begging to attend residential schooling for

up to two years. While parents or guardians were expected to fit the bill for this boarding, Ragged Industrial Schools continued to rely almost solely on charity and Government handouts because many parents were incarcerated or simply too poor to pay.

The popularity of Ragged Schools among the poorest in society remained dubious throughout the second half of the 19th century. In the Ragged School Union's Annual Report for 1857, for example, out of London's estimated half a million children, just over 21,500 had attended their lessons or used their services. Indeed at Field Lane, of the 563 children registered for the day school, only 275 were actively attending. The Ragged School Union concluded that they were, 'far from thinking that they have reached the limits of their work or even accomplished half that which is necessary for the Metropolis alone' The quality of the education given was equally questionable.

By 1861 an investigator for the Royal Commission on Education declared that, "There may, perhaps, be one or two cases in which under unpromising circumstances, a boy or girl has derived benefit from a ragged school, though I admit that I have been unable to discover any."

It would take a further nine years before Parliament agreed that Ragged schooling alone would not solve the problems of Ignorance and Want. The introduction of universal, compulsory schooling in London under the 1870 Education Act finally ensured that every child had a right to a secular school place and with it, as Dickens had desired 30 years earlier, 'to correct the miseries and woes' of poverty.

Further reading

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