Australian Schooling: A History of Social Control

By Susan Wight, Bendigo, Victoria

The history of Australian schooling is a history of social control. From the beginning the purpose of schooling was to control the population. Schooling was never intended to foster the development of individual children.

Schools in Australia were established very early – the first school in 1789 and three by 1793 under the guidance of Rev Richard Johnson. This was unusual for the time. In England less than 5% of children attended school.(1) Why then were schools thought necessary in the fledgling colony of New South Wales? This is particularly intriguing when you take into account that for the first five years the settlement struggled on the brink of starvation with only essential work carried out. Why was schooling a priority? The answer lies in the fact that NSW was a penal colony.

In late Georgian and early Victorian years there was a prevailing belief and fear of a "criminal class" which contributed to the introduction of transportation. It was hoped that the entire criminal class could eventually be shipped off to a far off colony which would serve as a gaol of no return.(2) Along with the 1500 adults of the first fleet were 50 children. Only three of these children were convicts but sixty percent of them were the children of convicts. The position of the convicts' children was an unusual one in that they were free but lived under convict conditions and were treated as members of the 'criminal class'.

The behaviour and attitudes of most of the convict population offended the values of the ruling elite. Initially men far outnumbered women in the population and convict women were condemned by their middle class male contemporaries as "damned whores" despite the probability that only 20% of them were prostitutes before transportation.(4) Women were actually included in the settlement plans to provide for the sexual needs of the men and so guard against 'unnatural practices'. They were therefore transported to be prostitutes and then condemned with that label. In many cases 'prostitution' consisted of co-habitating with one man as his wife without being married.(5) Many convicts were unable to marry because they left wives or husbands behind in England with scant hope of ever seeing them again. Marriages required official approval. Most children were born out of wedlock and from an authority point of view, they were the product of prostitutes and thieves and it was prudent to remove them from the harmful influence of their parents and school them into more acceptable behaviour. By 1798 children as young as three were attending school and children were taught to read so that they could receive moral instruction from the Bible. This was the avowed purpose of schools.

In 1802 Governor King expressed concerns about the moral welfare of children born to convict parents and wanted to withdraw children "from the destructive connexions and examples of their dissolute parents."(6) He was especially concerned about girls between the ages of eight and twelve and established an orphan institution to "give them an education to fit them for work and discourage them from prostitution". The girls were trained in the values of work, decency, cleanliness and modesty. Barcan argues that schooling was used to foster political loyalty to established authority which "was a natural objective when so many of the inhabitants of the colony were from the criminal classes and from the restless Ireland." This need was re-enforced by the convict revolt of 1804. (7) When Governor Bligh arrived in 1806 he carried instructions from England which read: "In a Settlement, where the irregular and immoral habits of the Parents are likely to leave their Children in a state peculiarly exposed to suffer from similar vices, you will feel the peculiar necessity that the Government should interfere on behalf of the rising generation and by exertion of authority as well as encouragement, endeavour to educate them in religious as well as industrious habits."(8) There was therefore a commitment by the English government for the funding of a school system which was to be run under a loose agreement with The Church of England. This was in marked contrast to England where no government money was spent on schooling before 1833 and it was precisely because New South Wales was a penal colony. There were still authority concerns about the moral habits of the population and women continued to be labelled as prostitutes. In 1806, for example Reverend Marsden drew up a female register for the colony. On it he classified women as either "married" or "concubines". The only marriages he recognised were made in his own church and those listed as 'concubines' ranged from a twelve-year-old girl to a sixty-four-year-old widow.(9) For the children "one obvious solution was a period of quarantine in an educational institution where (they) would have 'their propensities to evil corrected'."(10)

In 1809 when Governor Macquarie arrived he intended to re-establish social order and community

discipline after the tumultuous regime of the rum corps. A school system was seen as a means to that end. In 1812 he wrote that schools were intended to improve the "morals of the lower orders and develop religious principles in the young" and make them "dutiful and obedient". The Bigge Report urged that lower class children be separated "as much as possible from the adverse moral influence of their parents".(11) These are clear indications that schooling was for the management of the 'lower class'.

It was during the Macquarie years that the first attempts were made to school aboriginal children despite the fact that Aboriginal parents were 'remarkably backward to give up their children'. The problem of retaining students was solved by erecting an escape-proof wall around the school. There was no recognition of the rich education they already received from their own people. The motivation for schooling them was to transform them into labourers and semi-skilled workers. (12)

Schools in Van Dieman's Land received government assistance from 1817. The only government schools up until 1839 were attached to the convict system. Lieutenant governor Arthur noted "the importance of endeavouring by every means to remove that Convict taint the extinction of which as regards the rising generation, cannot, I submit, be purchased at too costly a price."(13) Schooling was viewed as having a moral benefit to the colony whose 'adults were sunken too deeply in vice to be reclaimable.' (14) Barcan sums up schooling in this period, "The education considered suitable for the lower classes was one emphasising the basic elements intended to develop political loyalty to England, to prepare boys and girls for the social station in which it had pleased God to place them and to implant principles of morality and religion, to provide immunity to the doctrines of Roman Catholicism, to develop the habit of reading the Bible, and to engender respect for the authority of the Church of England." (15)

There was a clear purpose to schooling in Australia from these early days. Schooling was touted as "for their own good" but used as a tool for social order. Groundwater-Smith suggests, "Initially, its purpose was to curb and discipline individual students and then to curb and discipline society itself."(16)

During the 1820s other denominations also demanded state subsidies to run schools but at the debilitating sectarian conflict meant each church was attempting to run its own denominational system.

The introduction of mass schooling across the colonies was a gradual process that began in 1833 with Governor Burke stating, "I may without fear of contradiction assert that in no part of the world is the general education of the People a more sacred and necessary duty of the government than in New South Wales. The reasons are too obvious to require that I should state them."(17) He floated the idea of a school system based on the Irish National System as a solution to the sectarian conflict. In Ireland, this nation-wide school system was seen as a unique or unprecedented opportunity to influence an entire population of young minds and was designed to be acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants, taking Catholics away from the politically inflammatory hedge schools. With the many Catholic ex-convicts in the Australian colonies, the Irish National System had obvious attractions for the colonial authorities.

A keen supporter of Bourke's ideas was Henry Carmichael who opened a Normal Institution in Sydney where he provided advanced secondary education and Prussian inspired teacher training. Prussian schooling was designed in 1819 to produce obedient soldiers and workers who were trained from childhood to accept authority.

Tasmania was the first colony in the British Empire to introduce compulsory schooling in 1868 and Queensland was the first to make schooling free in 1869 under the influence of the politician Charles Lilley who declared, "If the state did not build schools, it would have to build prisons." Victoria was the first state to introduce "free, secular, compulsory" education with The Education Act of 1872 and it is interesting for homeschoolers to note that there was the same provision then for non-attendance if "a child is under efficient instruction in some other manner". This clause was probably to enable the landed gentry to continue with their custom of educating their children at home with tutors and governesses or sending them back 'home' to England. (At one stage in the 19th century 20% of Australian pupils were educated at home by tutors, governesses or parents.)(18) It was also a watering down of the wording in the original Bill due to the strong opposition to the compulsory clauses especially in country districts where families were dependent on the income children could bring in.(19)

The traditional view of the push for "free, secular, compulsory" schooling in Australia has been that it

would provide a literate and numerate population to help advance Australia following the social upheaval and population explosion of the goldrush and educate the population enabling them to vote. A closer reading reveals the issue was far more complex. McCalman contends, "While touted as a means of enlightening the masses in effect, the process was one of social engineering 'to ensure that working class children grew up to be working class adults'."(20) The Church of England maintained that the curriculum should be restricted "to fit them for the station in life which they were born."(21) From the emancipist era, movement between social classes in the colonies had been much easier than in England. Schooling was intended to put a stop to that and sharpen the social class divisions.

In NSW the leading legislative figure in the push for "free, secular, compulsory" education was Henry Parkes who is revered in that state as the 'Parent of Public Education.' He had researched education quite extensively overseas and was taken with the systems of Prussia, Denmark, Norway and Holland. He saw schooling the lower classes as a means to prevent or check their tendency to depravity, vice and crime. It would make them "acquainted with their rights and mindful of their duties." In 1863 Parkes argued, "How much better to teach the child than to punish the hardened youth; how much cheaper to provide schools than to build gaols; how much more creditable to us as a community to have a long roll of schoolmasters than a longer list of gaolers and turnkeys." (22) Parkes was also responsible for the withdrawal of all funding to church schools in 1882 as a result of fear of Irish excesses. To Parkes, the Irish were disruptive "jabbering baboons" who were arriving in excessive numbers. If Irish children could be forced into state run schools, they would be, to some extent, removed from the harmful influence of their parents' religion.(23)

The Pope's declaration in 1864 that he was 'infallible" and his pronouncements that Catholics must obey the directives of the church meant that Catholics in the colonies were faced with the dilemma of paying substantially increased fees to maintain their commitment to Catholic schools or sending their children to state schools at the risk of excommunication.(24) State funding to denominational schools was not resumed until 1964.

Schooling was clearly aimed at class structure – in private schools 'young ladies concentrated on refinements to prepare them for a privileged role in society while the poor children received preparation for a future that pointed towards domestic and manual work.' When the Victorian Education Department realised that the compulsory clause of the 1872 Act would result in a congregation of all classes of children, "it tried to evade the social consequences of its own regulations by excluding the 'gutter children' from the regular schools the practice of the Department has been to abstain from sweeping these children into our schools, lest they impair the tone.'"(25) So the system was designed for 'lower class' children and yet the department itself considered some children 'too low' for its purpose – damning proof that schooling was not for the welfare of the children but the welfare of the state.

The person most instrumental in the formation of the NSW education system in the latter half of the nineteenth century was William Wilkins. He was sent from England in 1848 as 'a suitable person trained in the Irish National System' to take up the position of headmaster for a Sydney model school. His past experience included several years at Parkhurst Reformatory for juvenile criminals. Parkhurst had been built to house boys who were under sentence of transportation. Its aim was the general correction of the inmates with a view to deterring not only them but also other possible juvenile offenders. It was administered with full regard to penal discipline with each boy wearing a prison uniform and leg-irons. Constant supervision was maintained at all times.(26) It is significant that the Home Office considered a man with gaoling experience to be appropriate to run a model school in Sydney even after transportation to NSW ended. The population was still considered in need of reformation.

Wilkins' and Parkes' work on compulsory education was complementary with one author claiming that from 1854 onwards, Wilkins and Parkes simply echoed each other in their educational opinions. (27) In his subsequent posts with the Board of National Education, Council of Education and Department for Public Instruction he built up an extensive system of elementary schools in NSW. Under his guidance carefully graded rigid courses of instruction were defined, methods of teaching were set and pupils were classified according to age and ability. Educational authorities in other colonies were soon attracted by his ideas with the domineering and autocratic John Hartley building a similar curriculum and system in South Australia.

Throughout his career William Wilkins gathered ideas from other educationists overseas, touring England and the Continent in 1869 were he observed the practices of those countries celebrated for

their educational systems. He was heavily influenced by Dr James Kay-Shuttleworth who advocated the development of the individual. Dr Kay-Shuttleworth was a follower of Pestalozzi whose educational beliefs would appeal to many homeschoolers. Wilkins believed that each student had an equal right to have his faculties developed and to be dealt with individually and was contemptuous of rote teaching. However he introduced a scheme where teacher promotion was linked to pupil examination results and in practice this tended to cripple any Pestalozzi based teaching. Teachers were given credit only for how well their pupils could parrot the set curriculum and if they taught according to pupils' interests they would be working against their own advancement.

In South Australia, John Hartley too was attracted to Pestalozzi's ideas but he too introduced a 'payment by results' system, which defeated all such principles and encouraged cramming instead. Uniformity was the key to his system with an insistence on rigid adherence to regulations. Hartley in turn heavily influenced West Australian educational practice. Wilkins worked tirelessly within the broad framework of the Irish National System towards a unified system of education in NSW. In 1854 he wrote, "there should be but one system, specially adapted to the wants of the country, and controlled and administered by one managing body. In comparison to the advantages of this plan, all other reforms are of little importance." Perfection of a centralised system, not the good of the children, was his priority.

For the remainder of the century Wilkins' loyal followers ensured that the system became more mechanical, stereotyped and examination dominated.

As the end of the century approached, education was characterised by direct instruction as its most essential tool. "Students were empty vessels to be filled up with socially agreed upon 'important knowledge', mainly founded upon an ethnocentric British view of the world."(28) Rote methods of teaching and learning abounded and were backed up by physical discipline.

The principal of the Melbourne teacher training institution, Frederick Gladman wrote a book called School Method which sold 150,000 copies in 1897. It stressed order, neatness, thoroughness, discipline and respect for authority. His book was credited with educating a generation of teachers. In the late 1880s, William Grasby, a South Australian teacher made a trip to America and England. In America he had long discussions with William Harris, the United States Commissioner of Education (1889-1906) who, according to John Taylor Gatto, strongly advocated Prussian education. On his return Grasby wrote several publications criticising Australian education and advocating American methods. William Harris warmly welcomed Grasby's work and wrote the introduction for the American edition. One of the people on whom his work had a special influence was Frank Tate who was said to have "consumed it with interest" and quoted it daily. Grasby and Tate became great friends and Tate corresponded with William Harris.

In 1902 Frank Tate became Victoria's first Director of Education and leading reformer of Australian Education. He believed that careful schooling was a way to produce a population who thought alike. Tate placed great emphasis on the moral development of students and developing a scientific approach to schooling. Whilst he condemned a system which turned out students "as like each other as machine made bricks," he spent much of his career building a coordinated system which would turn out responsible citizens carefully schooled into British empire thinking. The compulsory school reader, The School Paper carried regular articles on the British monarchs and the glory of the empire. In his bid to create the best possible unified system he toured Germany and America and attended educational conferences in London where he became recognised as the Australian educator. In 1908 he praised Germany's 'wonderfully complete' education system and spoke of their industrial rise from the Prussian defeat at the hands of Napoleon as 'one of the striking phenomena of modern times' and attributed this rise to their commitment to education. He advocated the acquisition of 'school power' as a necessity to maintaining the trade supremacy of the British empire by supporting her traditional 'sea power'. He predicted "the result of world competition of the future will depend on the acquisition of school power."(29) Australia was to support Britain by our own acquisition of school power. School power was for the benefit of the nation and the empire – not the individual. "The State must, in its own defense, assume this obligation. The State everywhere concerns itself with sea-power, and a wise and prudent State concerns itself with full provision for school power."

During the war, The School Paper ran stories supporting the empire and was deliberately used to support the war. The end of the war brought a new era of interstate cooperation on education and Tate saw a "paramount need' for "moral and spiritual unity'. He was convinced that the way to avoid social discord and the threat of communism was through schooling. He saw that the war, which should have united Australians, had been very divisive with bitter sectarian disputes on conscription and he

believed that producing better citizens should be the future role of schools. Emphasis was placed on teaching 'rights and duties'. Tate was responsible for the development of the administrative structure, which is still recognisable today. (30)

In NSW a similar system developed under the strong leadership of its Director of Education, Peter Board The reform of curriculum and methodology owed much to the ideas of the American, John Dewey, who according to John Taylor Gatto, was instrumental in the American adoption of the Prussian method. "The aspirations of the reformers went to the great task of nation building. Like their counterparts in the United States, the progressives realised that mass education was the instrument which would enable the creation of a citizenry suited to sustaining a modern state."(31) The emphasis was on creating citizens to suit the state not promoting the growth of individuals.

After the war Tate made further trips overseas studying educational practices and attending conferences. Even after his retirement, he remained very influential in Australian Education, giving many talks promoting American Schooling methods, maintaining regular contact with the department and advising his former juniors.

Educational grants from the Carnegie Corporation in the nineteen thirties, according to Michael White "fed into strategic points where national ideas and values were shaped – in leadership of school systems, universities and teachers colleges."(32) It sounds like a philanthropic arrangement for Australia's benefit until you realise that the Carnegie corporation was formed by the steel baron and multi-millionaire, Andrew Carnegie. He was one of those wealthy industrialists identified by John Taylor Gatto as instigators of the American school system designed on Prussian principles to provide an obedient and subordinate population. According to Gatto "Carnegie proposed that men of wealth re-establish a synthetic free enterprise system based on cradle-to-grave schooling. The people who advanced most successfully in the schooling that was available to everyone would be given licenses to lead profitable lives, they would be given jobs and promotions and that a large part of the economy had to be tied directly to schooling"(33)

The Carnegie trustees initiated contact with Australia and sent their first visitor, James Russell, in 1928. James Russell is identified by Gatto as "one of the great schoolmen of American history" along with Horace Mann, William Harris and John Dewey who "made endless promises to industrialists and old-line American families of prominence that if the new Prussian scheme were given support, prospects of a revolution here would vanish." (34)

Russell reported back to the Carnegie Foundation that Australia was part of a "integral part of the ring around the Pacific. We can't ignore it without loss to ourselves. The time is ripe for closer contacts and the safest way is through educational agencies. The rest of the world may be worth cultivating but this part needs intensive tillage and irrigation."(35) In 1928 Frank Tate, influenced by Russell, was the driving force behind the establishment of the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) which received 50,000 in support from the Carnegie Corporation during its first ten years. Russell instigated travel grants for Australian educators to visit America and Europe. He wrote, "It occurs to me that if a few outstanding men in Australia were appointed Carnegie Visiting Professors of International Relations to America it would be a fine stunt."(36) Accordingly Frank Tate was among the first of many Australian educators to tour America.

Travel grants were made generally to older and more senior administrators and academics who were in a position to introduce changes upon their return. Michael White concludes that the influence of the Carnegie Corporation on Australian education was profound, vast and affected a whole generation of Australian educational leaders. "Cunningham and ACER were certainly instrumental in bringing to Australia the patterns of standardised achievement and intelligence testing and the "hard" statistical, social science, approach to educational research that swept America during the 1920s and 1930s."

Today school has become so entrenched in society that it is unquestioned by the majority of citizens. The social control is so complete that people actually believe that going to school 'socialises' their children. Although most teachers have honourable motives of helping children learn, their efforts are lost in the huge machine of the modern system which now has a life of its own. The original premise of social control underlies the current system and is continually perpetuated by teachers who grew up in the system and approved of it enough to make it their career. These days of course, "behaviour management" has replaced "discipline". Many Australian schools use the Bill Rogers Behaviour Management method. At the beginning of each school year the class discusses and makes its own set of rules. The odd thing is that every class ends up with the same set: The Treatment Rule, The Movement Rule and so on. Children are led to believe they are making these rules themselves and are

therefore more likely to "take ownership" of them, uphold them and apply peer pressure to their classmates to uphold them despite the fact the rules were actually decided on long before the rule making session began. Whilst there is nothing sinister about the rules themselves, the method used to introduce them and encourage children to believe they are their own is unfair and controlling. The social control has become less overt and more insidious. As Frank Tate stated in 1908, "We may take it as certain that nations have never faced the difficult and costly business of developing national education until they were driven to it by the pressure of danger from without or within. The history of Germany, of France, of Denmark, of the United States shows this."(37) In Australia schooling has always been for the benefit of the state rather than the individual. The convict origins of Australian schooling were far more heavily aligned to discipline than to education. There followed a period of conflict where church and state struggled for control of schooling from which the state emerged triumphant. Compulsory schooling grew out of a desire for a numerate, literate and well-behaved population. From very early on there were Prussian influences on Australian schooling. An efficient and centralised school system was built up in each state based on rote teaching and learning and schools were used to disperse government-approved opinions despite the sometimes benevolent intentions of individuals. The Carnegie Corporation brought direct American involvement to the Australian education scene with our leading educationalists heavily influenced by the very protagonists of the American Prussian based system. In Australia this served to refine a system of social control which was already well entrenched. Initially the purpose of schooling was reform, later that was amended to moulding and training young minds. Frank Tate's vision of the power of school has been realised.

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