

ART. XVII – *John Atkinson, 1773-1857: Yeoman Schoolmaster.*
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IN the 1950 volume of *Transactions* (pp. 171-4) I published an article on some interesting documents from Ainstable found among the papers of Miss Mary Collingwood who had died in 1949. One was a certificate signed by Isaac Hope, a bailie of the borough of Annan, that her grandmother, Agnes Atkinson, having clandestinely married Henry Smith, had appeared before him and they were fined for the irregular marriage. Since then, I have devoted a good deal of time to the Atkinson family and in particular to Agnes' father, John Atkinson.

Schoolmasters in Cumbria, as elsewhere, were often so ill-paid that they had to have additional interests and occupations. For example, Jonathan Boucher (1738-1804) recounts how his father combined school teaching with the keeping of an alehouse at Bromfield.¹ The 1829 Directory for Cumberland and Westmorland has at Renwick, Henry Moses combining the posts of schoolmaster and shopkeeper; and teaching was often combined with farming. In the Ainstable register for 1834 the father of a child baptized there describes his quality as schoolmaster and husbandman. Thomas Robinson, who had a school at Linghouse from 1791, combined this with farming, having lands at Ainstable, besides buying lands elsewhere. He was also incumbent of the parish of Renwick.

The father of the Agnes Atkinson who married Henry Smith at Annan was John Atkinson, son of Solomon. According to his grandson, Solomon kept a school at Lazonby for upwards of fifty years, and then from 1770, when he was made Deacon by the Bishop of Carlisle, until he died in 1801, combined the office of curate to an absentee incumbent with that of conducting the school. Unfortunately the ordination papers for this period in the diocese of Carlisle are still missing so we cannot discover where he was baptized. However, we do find in the parish registers of Cumwhitton, that a marriage was solemnized on July 18th, 1763 between Solomon Atkinson, single man, and Elizabeth Leach, spinster, both of "Noskew" in the parish and that in the banns book Solomon Atkinson is described as schoolmaster. There does not appear to have been any school at Cumwhitton and the name *Solomon* Atkinson is by no means a common one, so we may safely infer that the groom in this marriage was the Solomon Atkinson, schoolmaster of Lazonby, and father of John Atkinson.

Mention should here be made that the Admission registers for Carlisle Grammar School of 1766 have an entry

ATKINSON, Thomas (admitted October 20th)
third son of Solomon
Atkinson of Linbeck, parish of Muncaster,
Cumberland, husbandman (Agricola). (Left before
Christmas 1767)

No Solomon Atkinson appears in the parish registers of Muncaster nor in the records of the Muncaster Estate. Linbeck was a mill with some land attached to it and was leased. Probably the Solomon Atkinson in question moved on from Muncaster, and the presence

of his son in Carlisle Grammar School suggests that his migration was to the north of the county. Since he is described as the third son, the dates being suitable, and taking account of the somewhat unusual name Solomon, there is a strong possibility that the Solomon Atkinson who schoolmastered at Lazonby was an older brother, perhaps the first son.

Solomon and Elizabeth Atkinson had three children, John, baptized on 22 March 1773; Mary, on 9 December 1782; and Bridget on 15 November 1789, all at Lazonby. Mary never married, but on 8 September 1806 Bridget wed one Joseph Arnison of Lazonby and made her mark. As her husband signed his name there was no reason for her to make her mark if she could write. It is known that some wives who were at least literate to that extent, but whose husbands were unable to write, made their mark out of deference to them when they came to sign the registers. But here we have the case of someone whose father is described as literate in the Bishop's register and who taught a village school, apparently herself unable to write.

In his account of his early life,² one of John Atkinson's sons, also Solomon, tells us that his father, while still young, married a woman of some property, Barbara Coward, who was nine years older than John. In it he recounts a visit to Barbara Coward's father and describes his home as being in "one of those wild and beautiful dells which insinuate themselves among the masses of mountains on the borders of Yorkshire and Westmorland". Although every parish register on both sides of the county boundaries involved has been examined, no Coward of a suitable date (he died aged 90 in 1816) has been found. It would also appear that the first child of this marriage was Mary, and by the same token, no record of her baptism has been discovered. Her brother, Solomon, says that his father and mother farmed the small property which she had and the presumption is that the first child was born while they were still living in the area from which Barbara Coward came. (We know that there was this child, Mary, because in the 1851 Census for London her son, described therein as her brother's nephew, is given as having been born at Northsceugh. The registers at Cumwhitton reveal that he was John the son of Mary, then Mary Leach). However, the venture failed and John Atkinson and his wife came back to Lazonby and to his father.

The second child of the marriage was baptized at Lazonby on January 10th, 1795 and died three months later. In 1797 on 15 July another son, Solomon, was baptized at Lazonby and in 1801, on 6 June, Thomas was also baptized there. In 1803 a daughter Agnes appears in the Cumrew registers as having been baptized on 7 June. This is the daughter who contracted the runaway marriage and who did not die until 1882.

In the entry for John, his father is described as husbandman; and similarly for Solomon. In the case of Thomas, he is schoolmaster; and also when Agnes was baptized. According to his son's account of his own early life, the failure of his father, John, to farm his wife's property reduced him to the status of day-labourer. He also says, perhaps to draw attention to his humble origins and his rise above it, "I was the offspring of indigence, born in the humblest rank of life, the son of a Cumbrian peasant."

Without going into the niceties of what is meant by "husbandman" at this particular time, we can see some evidence that in the case of John Atkinson it certainly did not mean a "day-labourer". The following facts are relevant. In the muniments at Low House, Armathwaite, we find that on 25 March 1805, there was a conveyance of Nicholcroft, Towngate, by John Threlkeld to John and Barbara Atkinson for £227. When Barbara died, on 31 January 1838 this was still the Atkinson residence. But by

the 1841 Census John was living at the schoolhouse. According to the Valuation Book for Ainstable in 1819, we see that John Atkinson is the owner and occupier of fields and a dwelling house, but in 1841 these were occupied by a Joseph Hetherington. So the picture we have is of someone who had combined the traditional roles of schoolmaster and farmer, but with a growing commitment to the former. In the Census, he is "schoolmaster".

When John's second living son, Thomas, was baptized on 6 June 1801 he was described as schoolmaster. His father, Solomon, was buried on 23 November of that year. It would seem natural to infer that perhaps in addition to his husbandry John was assisting his father at Lazonby and then, since he was at Cumrew and described as "schoolmaster" when Agnes was born, that he was teaching from a base there, because we have no records of any school at Cumrew before the mention of a school house and school being erected by subscription in 1847. John may have been conducting some small private school or he could have been assisting Thomas Robinson with his establishment at Linghouse before moving to Ainstable in 1805.

The lands which endowed the benefice of Renwick were in Ainstable parish, and the Valuation Rolls show that Robinson also had lands there in his own right. Thus, they shared schoolmaster-farming in the same district. As we have seen, he is described as "schoolmaster" in the Census of 1841, as he is in that of 1851 (with the additional information - "English language, Arithmetic, etc. . . ." in which one Alice, wife of Michael Fawcett is also returned as "schoolmistress"). The 1851 Census gives us some pointers to John Atkinson's ability as a schoolmaster. There were three children under five, 35 boys and 24 girls between five and ten and over the age of ten 11 pupils, including one of eighteen, one of sixteen and two of fifteen. There were ten in the parish not listed as attending school. At the time this is a very high proportion of the children to be going to school. It is interesting too that one of the pupils was Isaac Pearson who followed Atkinson's successor as schoolmaster. In 1861 the school is described as an Endowed Grammar but like many others it lost that status in 1871. Nevertheless it must be reckoned that the long labours of John Atkinson contributed no little part in raising it to such a height.

The 1851 Census also has an entry under Ruckcroft (a small hamlet within the parish of Ainstable) for a William Smith, described as a schoolmaster, Jane his wife and Mary his daughter. The parish registers record the baptism of the daughter on 26 April 1829. There is no information as to where he taught. But Mannix & Whellan's *Directory* of 1847 states that the money from the land with which the school was endowed was paid to the "masters" in the plural. So he may have assisted John Atkinson.

An interesting sidelight on John Atkinson's situation appears in the Poll Book for the East Cumberland election on 7 and 8 August 1837 in the Kirkoswald polling district. The candidates were Aglionby and James and Sir James Graham. The first were elected on a Reform platform and Sir James Graham was not returned. John Atkinson is described as an elector, and voted for the Reform interest.

In his autobiographical notes, his son tells us that John was expected to follow the same pattern as that taken by his father, who was disappointed by the resistance of his son who "felt perhaps not unwisely that one who farmed twenty acres by the labour of his own hands was a richer and more independent man than the starveling curate of some wealthy rector". He also tells us that it was intended by his maternal grandfather,

supported by his mother, that he, Solomon, should “at all events be a parson”. He was to “scrape as much learning together as he could in the village school, commence his career as an Usher and fight his way as well as he could to a pulpit”. We know, of course, that in fact he went to Cambridge, where he was a Senior Wrangler, in 1821. He was not ordained but became a barrister. He regretted that he had not been able to go to one of the Grammar Schools but had had to content himself with “the miserable instruction which our village school affords”. However when the Dean of Carlisle who was also President of Queen’s College,³ Cambridge, examined Atkinson as to his competence to have a University education, he was able to report to him that he had read Virgil, Horace, the Greek Testament and the Cyropedia, and he was also able to satisfy the Dean as to his competence in Arithmetic, Algebra and Geometry. This was hardly the attainment one would expect of someone whose education had been confined to the “miserable instruction” in his father’s school. In fact, this was not the whole truth. He had attended the private school run by the afore-mentioned Thomas Robinson at Linghouse, which had, for the times, a remarkably enlightened curriculum; and his entry to Trinity College, Cambridge, in the printed copy of the admission book, under school gives “Mr Boustead (Brampton)”. This is a mistake. It was the headmaster of the famous Free Grammar School at Bampton.

John Atkinson’s son had gone to Cambridge determined to achieve a fellowship. When his college, Queen’s, did not look like providing one by the time he graduated, he transferred – migrated – to Trinity, where the fellowships were awarded purely on the results of examinations, and without reference to the place of birth. However, immediately after graduating he married and this was a total bar to a fellowship. He tells us that this step was opposed by “the most violent representations” from his father and estrangement from his family seems to have been the result. By 1824 he was so financially embarrassed that he decided to leave this country for America under an assumed name. But on his way to Glasgow to seek a ship he took the opportunity of making a last appeal for help from his connections both in Yorkshire and Cumberland, but he was turned away.

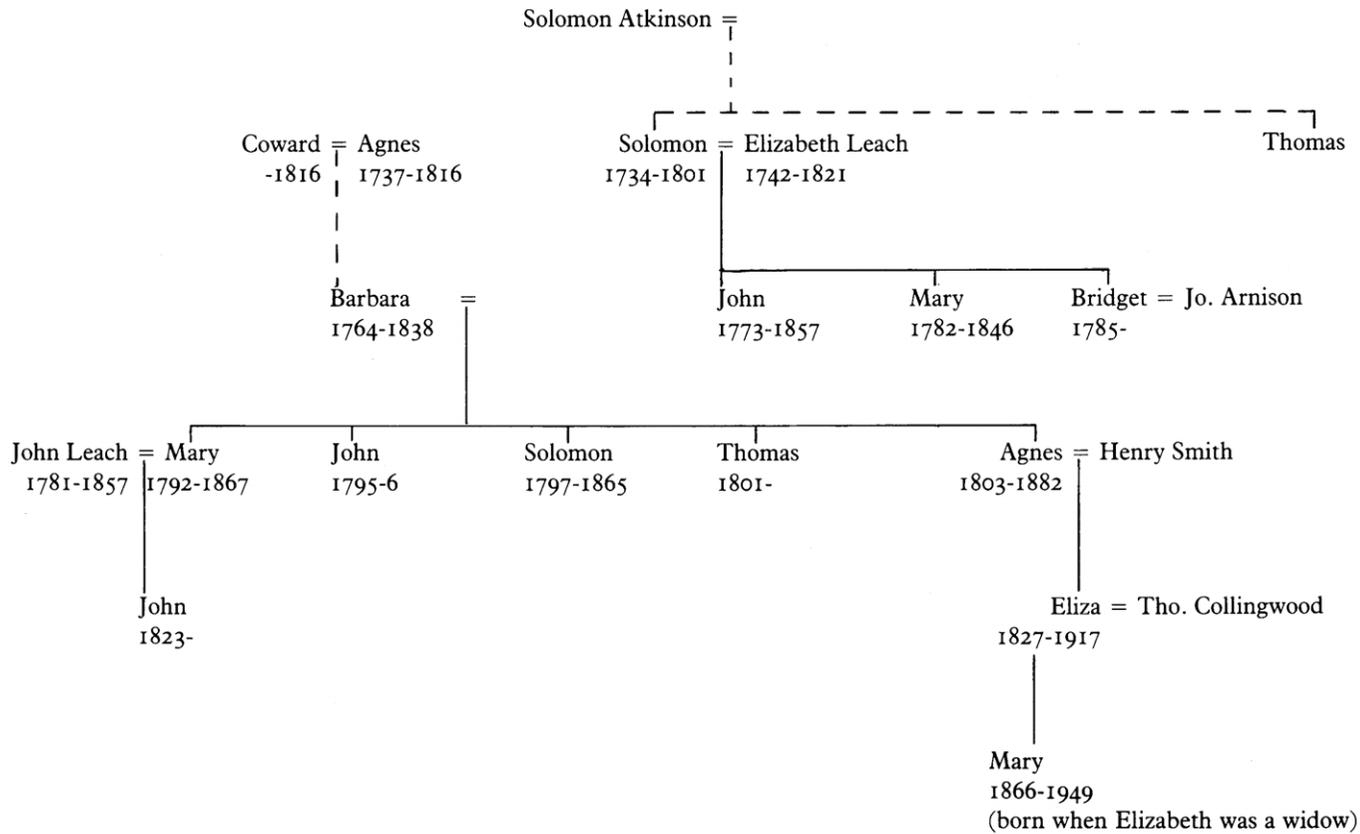
By the time he returned to this country the circumstances of his family had improved and his home had become “comparatively an abode of wealth by the accession of the property of a near kinsman”. However, he tells us that “no congratulation or joy awaited him but insult and mockery”, and this seems to have meant a complete break with his home and family. One suspects that his mother, who was obviously the dominant partner in the marriage, was the main trouble: she died in 1838. When his father’s death was registered, on 4 January 1857, the information was laid by his son Solomon, who was present at his end in 8 Crescent, Carlisle, which was then the home of a doctor. He also signed the declaration, and in the column, “Rank or Profession”, he states that his father was a “Yeoman”. However, the registers of the burial ground of Carlisle show that John Atkinson, when he was buried on 7 January, was declared, by whoever laid the information to the burial officials, to be “Schoolmaster”.

Notes and References

¹ *Reminiscences of an American Loyalist, 1738-1789*, 8.

² “The Struggles of a Poor Student through Cambridge”, *London Magazine & Review*, N.S. vol 1, no. 3, (April 1825).

³ The Queen’s form is later.



JOHN ATKINSON, YEOMAN SCHOOLMASTER

