

The Case Against the School Boards of Cheshire, 1870-1902¹

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THIS 'is one of the *most ignorant parishes in England*—if a master corrects any child in the School he will certainly be interfered with by the parents and those being the most illiterate and ignorant persons imaginable,' and 'There is a deal to be done to have the children think for themselves—this I attribute to former training and influence at home; so the best Code that could be issued in England would be the "Compulsory Code"—(Make Parents send their children to school, say for 6 years)'.² Thus wrote headmasters of Bosley village schools in the 1860s, illustrating some of the difficulties faced by voluntary schools at that time. Education was not free, nor compulsory, nor even available in some areas. Elementary schools, which had been provided for the poorer classes of society since the second half of the seventeenth century,³ were on an insecure financial footing, and there was little logic about their distribution. Stockport, for example, boasted four schools in one street, and none in some other well populated parts of the town.

In the countryside, a growing objection was to the control of the vast majority of the village schools by the Church of England, while in the towns, government reports of the 1860s, which were brought out to give support for future Liberal legislation, showed that shortage of places and poor attendance were also major problems which the 1870 Elementary Education Act had to remedy. By this Act, rate-aided schools, run by elected School Boards, were to 'fill the gaps' in the voluntary system, and all public elementary schools had to offer parents a conscience clause for religious instruction. The Act of 1870 marks a major turning point in the history of education in this country. In terms of administration, it introduced the system of payment from the rates, of democratic control through local bodies, and of the operation of the conscience clause, all of which thrive, though not without criticism, a century later. The centuries old dream of education for all became administratively possible in 1870, and compulsory ten years later. By the end of the century, the new board schools were educating as many children as the voluntary schools.⁴

The geographical distribution of the board schools was uneven over the country as a whole. Areas which had been largely unaffected by the increases in population during the industrial revolution were usually well served by village schools,

¹ This article is based mainly on secondary sources. A more detailed examination of the work of individual school boards could be made from their extant proceedings which are briefly listed in the appendix.

² Bosley school log book, 30 August 1864 and 25 May 1863. I would like to thank the present headmistress, Mrs. B. Read, for her permission to quote from the log book.

³ C. Rogers 'Education in Lancashire and Cheshire, 1640-1660', L.C.H.S., CXXIII, 1971.

⁴ M. Cruickshank, *Church and State in English Education*, 1963, p. 67.

some of which had been established as elementary, or even grammar⁵ schools centuries earlier. The population of Cheshire rose slowly in most areas⁶, a decrease by migration from the rural east and west being counterbalanced by the end of the century by the suburban belt along the southern bank of the Mersey. Across the north of the county, therefore, where old endowments could not hope to cater for the large increases in population, we would expect to find school boards flourishing, with voluntary schools further south holding their own. A cursory examination of the period up to 1902 seems to support this, as the largest boards were located in Birkenhead, Poulton-cum-Seacombe, Runcorn, Stockport, Stalybridge, Dukinfield, Macclesfield and Congleton. Smaller boards in the north covered, by 1902, Daresbury, Whitley, Sale, Bramhall, and Disley. Small rural boards were scattered over the rest of the county, making a total of twenty-six in the whole of Cheshire.⁷ Other agricultural counties had similar numbers: by 1900, Shropshire and Dorset had twenty-two boards, Oxfordshire twenty-four, and Berkshire and Norfolk only fourteen. Even Lancashire, with five times the population of Cheshire, had only fifty. In all these counties, large areas were not touched by school board activity.

What then, of the 'many voluntary schools' to which Mrs. Cruickshank refers, which 'had been crushed out of existence', and of the others which had 'completely exhausted their credit and overdrawn their accounts' despite their increased grant after 1870 and in contrast to the 'continually expanding' public system?⁸ Midwinter has shown that in Lancashire the voluntary schools, far from going into decline, increased fifty *per cent* in number during the period 1870-1902.⁹ Cheshire presents a similar picture, as voluntary schools in receipt of a parliamentary grant increased from three hundred and sixteen in 1870 to four hundred and sixty-three in 1896. In contrast, the number of board schools in Cheshire was remarkably low, being only thirty in 1896, which barely exceeded the number of school boards!

It is this last phenomenon which deserves special attention. Whereas, by the end of the century, almost fifty *per cent* of children were attending board schools in the country as a whole, the figure for Cheshire was no more than five *per cent*. Clearly, the few school boards which did exist were not functioning properly, and it was this which infuriated Liberals outside the county as well as within it. The *School Board Chronicle* had a running battle with Cheshire throughout this period, the following editorial comments giving some idea of the strength of the hostility which the paper reflected. The editor wrote in 1882, 'We have observed in the county of Cheshire generally, a backwardness in realizing the advantages which a community derives from a system of education under public control'.

⁵ For example, the grammar schools at Bunbury and Halton.

⁶ R. Lawton, 'Population Trends in Lancashire and Cheshire from 1801' L.C.H.S., CXIV, 1962.

⁷ To the south of the county, only Over and Church Coppenhall had school boards of a size comparable to those in the north.

⁸ M. Cruickshank, *loc cit.*

⁹ E. C. Midwinter, 'The Administration of Public Education in Late Victorian Lancashire'. *Northern History*, IV, (1969), pp. 184-196.

Four years later, he claimed that 'Our readers of the south, the east, and the far north are familiar with the fact that the greatest stronghold in England of the denominational system is the county of Chester and what may be called the Cheshire district of Lancashire'. In 1891 he returned to this same theme. 'It is one of the most curious facts in the current social history of this country that the county of Cheshire has, in a manner, for these twenty years, marked out a position for itself, and set itself apart from the rest of the country, in the spirit and degree in which it has held on to the mediaeval pretensions of an exclusive priest-managed voluntary system . . . in Cheshire, the contagion has in a peculiar manner got hold of the teachers'.¹⁰ There is no doubt that Cheshire, more than any other county, showed an aversion to the reform of her elementary system, and in order to examine this reluctance further it would be helpful once again to distinguish between the rural and the urban boards.

In rural areas strenuous efforts were made to avoid having a school board, two sections of the community forming an almost invincible alliance against the new state system. Farmers had been expressing distrust of the extension of elementary education for two centuries, fearing the loss of the children, their main source of cheap labour, who would be in schools learning ideas above their station. Now, as ratepayers, the farmer stood to lose twice over. The shrewd E. M. Sneyd-Kynnersley, an H.M.I. in the county during the school board era, commented that an experienced observer in Cheshire had once remarked, 'If the average farmer had to choose between the Colorado beetle and a School Board, he wouldn't know which way to go'.¹¹ Sneyd-Kynnersley also pointed out that the school board 'is sure to consist largely of farmers who are much more interested in breaking the law than in enforcing it'.¹²

The farmers' allies in opposing the school board system were the clergy, who had a double motive for their opposition. Not only did they object to what they believed to be the non-Christian character of the board schools (though what one suspects they meant was the non-denominational character), but they also saw the new schools as a threat to the existence of their own, especially when the immense financial advantages of the rate aided schools became increasingly clear, and the state began to demand higher and costlier standards from all schools. The strength of this opposition was felt in every quarter of the county. 'Great objections' prevented a school board from being formed at Haslington in 1873, at Dunham Massey in 1872, Knutsford in 1894 and Ditton in 1892. Parishioners were successfully urged to contribute to the extension of existing voluntary schools in these townships as an alternative. Hoole in 1883 and Cheadle in 1890 used a voluntary rate of 2d. and 8d. respectively in order to avoid the 'vexatious and costly machinery' of a school board.

¹⁰ *School Board Chronicle* (hereafter *S.B.C.*) XXVIII, 1882, p. 208; XXXVI, 1886, p. 496; XLV, 1891, p. 94.

¹¹ E. M. Sneyd-Kynnersley, *H.M.I., Some passages in the life of one of H.M. Inspectors of Schools*, 1910, p. 139.

¹² *Minutes of the Education Committee of the Privy Council* (hereafter *P.C. Mins.*), 1884-5, p. 298.

There were some parishes, however, which could not, or would not, respond to such exhortations, and in these circumstances the Education Department forced a school board on to indifferent or even hostile inhabitants. One George Buckley greeted the news that Moulton was about to be so honoured by shouting at a public meeting that 'Those in favour of the Board Schools should be transported for life, for if they have a Board School, they would never have finished paying'.¹³ An election did not in itself guarantee that a board would be formed. For the five seats at Dutton in the 1898 election, only one candidate stood, a situation commonly found in rural board elections. At Daresbury, the Education Department had to name five members of the board in 1878. 'No contest' situations were almost taken for granted in the countryside, where it was simply a sign of apathy. Some members were later disqualified for non-attendance, and at least one board, Bramhall, was criticized by the local press for failing to meet regularly.¹⁴

The activities of these rural boards are indeed a matter for laughter or despair, 'according to our standpoint',¹⁵ and illustrate one of the fundamental faults in our early state system. Apathy on the part of members and voters alike resulted from the *ad hoc* nature of the boards, and the small population in each area. The irony of the situation was that in general these, and not the larger urban boards, had to run Cheshire's board schools. Daresbury was the first authority in the county to abandon the voluntary system out of sheer financial necessity, and conduct all its elementary schools as board schools by 1893.¹⁶ The grandiose matters of principle which animated the urban boards, reflecting national disagreements in matters of politics and religion, hardly touched their smaller counterparts in the countryside where the majority of members were fairly homogeneous in their affiliations. The normal pattern of membership was for the local Anglican incumbent to be elected alongside farmers in an alliance against the school board principle which was hardly broken during the whole period.¹⁷

The most persistent source of disagreement was the amount of money to be spent, because a penny rate produced such a meagre income in rural areas. At Moulton, for example, it would pay for the education of one blind and deaf boy at a special school. Angry ratepayers at Church Cottenham called for the resignation of their board three times after accusations of extravagance. Possible divisions of opinion over religious instruction were normally avoided by Bible reading without comment, but a High Churchman such as the Rev. W. C. Reid, rector of Church Cottenham, could stir the board of which he was chairman into 'a very warm discussion' by his activities. Another board member, T. H. Heath, declared 'that he wished it to be understood that he would not rest until he had succeeded in turning the rector out of the school'.¹⁸ The Bible itself caused con-

¹³ *S.B.C.* XLVIII, 1892, p. 654.

¹⁴ Sneyd Kynnersley. *op. cit.*, chap. XVI, has some interesting remarks on the activities of rural school boards.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁶ *S.B.C.*, L, 1883, p. 496. Bramhall and Weaverham followed suit by 1896.

¹⁷ A revolt by Wirral farmers against the clergy is noted in *P.C. Mins.*, 1884-5, p. 298.

¹⁸ *S.B.C.*, XXIX, 1883, pp. 243, 298.

sternation at Over when children were inadvertently given copies printed in German.

So far, then, the history of the school boards in Cheshire presents nothing which would mark out the county for the virulent attack noted above. The frailties and shortcomings of the rural boards were repeated in almost every county, and despite later efforts to rationalise them into united districts, they serve as a reminder of the difficulties inherent in allowing education to be controlled by small units of local government. The towns, however, present a different picture and there can be no doubt that they hold the key to Cheshire's poor response to the opportunities of state education. The 'beacons of the future', as Sherlock Holmes called the board schools, flickered fitfully in a county where for thirty years the political acumen of the supporters of the voluntary system used the letter of the law to twist its spirit. The outcome was that most towns which needed a school board did not get one, and, most extraordinary of all, towns which did not need a board were the earliest to start one.

Chester contained a thousand children in 1870 for whom there was no school accommodation, but in common with most of the old cathedral cities, Canterbury, York, Ely, Peterborough, Winchester, Hereford, and Lichfield, the clergy were able to influence and shape the resistance to the formation of a board.¹⁹ In Chester, they went to the lengths of organising a voluntary rate and running an undenominational school with the proceeds. Clearly, in this case at least, the avoidance of a compulsory rate was more important than the maintenance of a specifically Anglican school. Perhaps Sneyd-Kynnersley had part of the answer when he wrote, 'The unity of the Church of Rome is proverbial, but in Chester there is dissension that carries us back to the middle ages. The regular and the secular clergy have their camps there, and divide the city into two districts'.²⁰

The part played by the clergy in Chester was taken in Crewe by the London and North Western Railway Company whose chairman, Lord Stalbridge, explained in 1894, 'what is done at Crewe . . . in subscribing to schools, is only done after most careful consideration as to whether it is cheaper for the shareholders to pay a subscription or to pay the rate necessary to support a school board, the only consideration moving the directors being the economy which can be effected to the shareholders'.²¹ What was done in fact was to try to cater for a deficiency of nearly one thousand school places in the town by erecting new, and extending old schools at the company's expense. By 1900 they had built the seventh free and again undenominational school, though, because the majority on the local committee were churchmen, the teachers chosen were Anglicans.²²

Other towns tried with less success to avoid having a board if one was needed. The most notorious of these was Birkenhead, which had an accommodation

¹⁹ For the story of the Chester machinations, see M. Sturt, *The Education of the People*, 1967, pp. 308-310. Records of the ill-fated school in Commonhall Street are in the city of Chester Record Office, DES/7.

²⁰ *P.C.Mins.*, 1882-3, p. 369.

²¹ W. M. Chaloner, *The Social and Economic Development of Crewe, 1780-1923*, 1950, p. 224; A. W. Geeson *The development of elementary education in Crewe 1840-1918*, Durham M.Ed. unpublished thesis, 1969.

²² *S.B.C.*, LXVII, 1902, p. 693.

deficiency of about two and a half thousand places.²³ For over twenty years, the ratepayers staved off a board by using the excuses that many children, belonging to middle class suburbia, did not attend mere elementary schools, and for those who did, there were plenty of schools available just outside the Birkenhead boundary. 'There continues to be', complained the editor of the *School Board Chronicle* in 1882, 'a good deal of vague popular feeling in the borough to the effect that the School Board is a thing to be avoided if possible'.²⁴

What forced the issue in Birkenhead, ironically, was a Conservative measure of 1891 which gave elementary schools ten shillings *per annum* per child to enable them to abolish fees. Designed for the salvation of voluntary schools which found the collection of fees a difficult task, the Act put an increased strain on the many Cheshire schools which were notorious for charging fees much higher than ten shillings. Parents could now demand a free elementary education which these voluntary schools could no longer afford to give. The immediate answer of the Birkenhead School Extension Committee was quoted with relish by the left wing *Liverpool Daily Post*. 'Our general design has been to prevent, as far as possible, the "infection" of demanding free places spreading in any individual school'.²⁵

After a vain attempt by a local M.P. to stop parents being informed of their rights in this matter, and severe criticism by the H.M.I. about the quality of the existing schools, the new Liberal government issued an order in 1893 compelling Birkenhead to form a school board, and the educational picture in the borough changed almost overnight. Moribund voluntary schools were rescued, and new schools were built at such expense that the board was censured by the ratepayers for extravagance in building swimming baths to support Britain's naval empire, and developing evening schools, higher grade schools, and a pupil teacher centre.

Runcorn was another town which resisted a board at first, but this was for a short time only. Final notice was served on the town in May 1874, and, despite more extraordinary variations in the estimates of deficiency in the number of school places—depending largely on different definitions of which children should be in school—Runcorn managed to operate within the spirit of the 1870 Act better than any other Cheshire town. Even so, opposition was not lacking, for churchmen formed the majority on the board until 1901. At a Runcorn Union meeting in 1877, the Rev. Mr. Spencer, vicar of Daresbury, said that 'the School Board at Runcorn was totally unnecessary. The schools in existence were at the time educating 75 per cent of the children, and the School Board had been obtained from motives of spite . . . shut it [the school board] up. The burden falls on the ratepayers, and I don't care 2d. for anybody else. They will lay the last ounce on us that will break our backs'.²⁶

²³ For many years there were erratic variations in this figure; *S.B.C.* XXVIII, 1882, pp. 184-7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, XLVIII, 1892, p. 326.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, XVIII, 1877, p. 42; F. M. Martin, *Elementary education in the poor law union of Runcorn from 1870 to 1903*, Durham M.Ed., unpublished thesis, 1970.

The hard core of the opposition to the state system was in the towns which elected a school board before the end of 1871 where none was necessary, Congleton, Dukinfield, Macclesfield, Stalybridge, and Stockport. The *raison d'être* of these boards lay in sections 25 and 74 of the 1870 Act, which allowed a school board to pay the fees of poor children in voluntary schools out of the rates, and to pass bye laws making attendance at voluntary schools compulsory. All were firmly opposed to board schools, and, in the opinion of at least one member, were 'formed for the express purpose of voting money to denominational schools'.²⁷ Essential to this scheme was right wing control of the boards concerned, which was achieved in two ways. At some elections, an attempt was made to shortlist the candidates, ensuring that those who supported a voluntary system of education formed the majority of candidates, and that the number of candidates correspond to the number of seats on the board, thus creating a 'no contest' situation.²⁸ Whereas in the countryside this tended to be a sign of apathy, in the towns it indicated political manipulation.

When Macclesfield town council first considered applying for a school board, the M.P., W. C. Brocklehurst, pointed out the advantages of arranging the election of gentlemen who had the confidence of the voluntary school managers,²⁹ and the mayor tried to persuade many of the original twenty candidates to withdraw from the first election, leaving four Anglican, four Nonconformist, and one Roman Catholic nomination for the nine seats. However, to the disgust of the mayor and the editor of the *Courier and Herald* alike, a Wesleyan put up on the eve of the poll, thus forcing an election.³⁰ In 1874 and 1901 there was no contest, and talk of compromise in 1895, and it would seem that there was general agreement during most of the life of this board that there should be five Anglican, three Nonconformist, and one Roman Catholic members.

This pattern of events was repeated at Stockport, where the editorials of the Tory *Stockport Advertiser* again encouraged 'no contests'.³¹ Members of the town council issued a premature list of the names of future members of the board in order to represent the various denominational interests,³² and in 1876 the mayor visited the various candidates in person in order to persuade some of them to withdraw.³³ When these efforts failed, the Anglicans made use of the peculiarities of the cumulative voting system in order to ensure a majority.³⁴ Thus, in 1870, six out of seven Tories were elected in Stockport, but only five out of the fourteen Liberals. The ratepayers, claimed the *Stockport Advertiser*,

²⁷ *S.B.C.*, XIII, 1875, p. 308.

²⁸ The excuse was usually to avoid the costs and bickering of an election.

²⁹ *Macclesfield Courier and Herald*, 4 February 1871.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4 and 11 November 1871.

³¹ *Stockport Advertiser*, 18 November 1870.

³² *Ibid.*, 18 and 25 November 1870.

³³ I. J. D. Steele *A study of the education of the working class in Stockport during the nineteenth century*, Sheffield M.A. unpublished thesis, 1968, p. 205.

³⁴ Each voter was given as many votes as there were seats, and he could distribute several votes for one candidate, or one vote for several candidates. P. H. J. H. Gosden, *The development of educational administration in England and Wales*, 1966, pp. 141-2.

had decided that 'unsectarian teaching and German pantheism will find no abiding place in the schools of this neighbourhood'.³⁵

Membership of the urban boards was often dominated by clergymen who were more numerous in each school district than they were in the countryside. Five out of nine on the Dukinfield board in 1889 were clergymen, four out of seven in 1897 at Congleton, five out of nine in 1889 and 1895 at Stalybridge, and five out of nine in 1901 at Macclesfield. Though Roman Catholics were in a minority in each town, they normally secured representation by judiciously nominating only their priest and block voting for him. Also well represented were employers, whose main interest seems to have been to secure exemption from full time schooling as soon as possible over the age of ten. As one employer claimed at Macclesfield in 1878, they were 'putting too much pressure on the brains of the rising generation'.³⁶ Each board had the power to decide its own exemption 'standard', the passing of which allowed children to work half time between the ages of ten and thirteen. In Macclesfield where the exemption standard was abysmally low, the Rev. J. Freeston had to urge the board 'to work in the interests of the children, and less for those of the employers'.³⁷

In contrast to those which had to run board schools, the urban boards which ran none were proud of their low expenditure, competing with each other to see how little they could spend. 'I think ours is one of the cheapest School Boards to be found anywhere', boasted the chairman at Dukinfield in 1877, later comparing his $\frac{3}{4}$ d. rate to 9d. at Leeds. When Mr. Cuppleditch claimed for Stockport in 1879 that his was 'the cheapest Board in England' with a 1d. rate, he had ignored Macclesfield (under $\frac{1}{2}$ d.), Congleton (under 1d.) and Stalybridge ($\frac{3}{4}$ d.).

A second essential requirement for the success of the 'sheep in wolves clothing', the Tory-voluntaryist alliance which controlled these boards, was that they should ensure that in their area, the board should neither build board schools, nor take over the management of moribund voluntary schools. The purpose of the Stockport board seemed to be 'to fill the voluntary schools with children, and . . . to prevent the introduction of the board school system'.³⁸ Macclesfield school board passed the following amendment to a resolution in 1894, to place 'on record its firm determination to oppose the introduction of board schools, believing that they would greatly augment the burdens of the people without improving the educational status of the town'.³⁹

The ultimate line of defence lay in 'Mr. Pell's clause', section 41 of the Conservative measure of 1876 called Lord Sandon's Act. The Act itself provided for the establishment of school attendance committees in those areas not served by a school board, with simple powers to compel attendance at voluntary schools. Clause 41 allowed for the dissolution of a school board if it ran no schools of its

³⁵ *Stockport Advertiser*, 9 December 1870.

³⁶ *S.B.C.*, XX, 1878, pp. 202-4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, IL, 1893, p. 154 E. & R. Frow, *The Half Time System in Education*, 1970, *passim*.

³⁸ *S.B.C.* editorial, XXI, 1879, p. 542.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, LIII, 1895, p. 8, quoted in anger by J. Brunner and J. L. Hammond *Public Education in Cheshire in 1896*, n.d., pp. 42-3.

own, and for its replacement by a school attendance committee, which could neither build nor run a school. As Cheshire's urban boards were *de facto*, though not *de jure*, attendance committees already, the only obstacle to their taking advantage of Mr. Pell's clause was pride in their own achievements, which was apparent on several occasions during the remainder of the century.

A public meeting of ratepayers resolved to have Dukinfield's board dissolved in 1891 'to lessen expenditure', although the education rate was still under one penny.⁴⁰ Stalybridge town council voted to dissolve its board, but before the Education Department could give its assent, a triennial election had been held, deferring any action for three years. By that time the board itself, as well as other local bodies, had petitioned in favour of its retention. The town council at Congleton voted to dissolve its school board when a local school, St. Peter's National, announced its intention to surrender to the board. The Town Clerk 'apprehended that that was a good reason for the discontinuance of the School Board for it was pretty certain that if the Board had a school thrown upon it they would then have a Government officer coming down and finding fault with this, that, and the other—possibly the school would not be grand enough, and something new must be added, with (say) a tower and a peal of bells, which seem to be regarded as essential to the prosperity of some Board schools throughout the country'.⁴¹ When a vote taken at a meeting of ratepayers proved inconclusive, however, the council withdrew their demand that the board should be dissolved, and a year later in 1880, the mayor himself was nominated on to the board.⁴²

At Macclesfield, too, there was a half hearted attempt by the town council to abolish the board, and the council election of 1886 was fought on this issue. Twice, in 1886 and 1889, the council was just too late to have the board dissolved before a triennial election. Crisis point in the town came in 1894, however, when in addition to the familiar difficulties caused by the 'Free Education Act' of 1891, two schools announced their intention to close and hand over to the board. One of them, Towneley Street, had been recently established by nonconformists whose opponents believed, not without cause, that its main object was to be closed so that it could be handed over for the board to run. The board refused to accept either school, and the ratepayers had to continue the other school, Lord Street, out of their own pockets—but not under the aegis of the board!

Of all the Cheshire boards which brought the county into disrepute, however, none achieved greater notoriety than that of Stockport. In 1879, the town council voted to have the board dissolved when two voluntary schools threatened closure and the board refused to take them over. When it became clear that the alternative was the erection of a board school to meet the consequent deficiency of school places, the board voted to dissolve itself. 'The Conservative party', claimed

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, XLVI, 1891, pp. 81-2. A last ditch stand here included such suggestions as refusing to implement the 1891 Act which had probably raised the issue in the first place, and an ingenious scheme for the board to manage the children but not the buildings.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, XXI, 1879, pp. 542-3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, XXI, 1879, pp. 566, 573, and 594; and XX, 1879, p. 20.

the *Stockport Advertiser*, 'are to be congratulated upon a great triumph', and the necessary agreement was obtained from Whitehall before the Liberals were returned to power in 1880. The *Sheffield Independent* suggested as an epitaph that the Stockport board had been 'murdered by denominational and Tory spite'. The Liberals did not accept defeat quietly. Mr. Hopwood, Stockport's M.P. after 1880, questioned the whole procedure in the House of Commons, and A. J. Mundella accused the Stockport Tories of having obtained a majority on the board by the 'distribution of gin and drink at the election'. An association was formed for the board's re-establishment and renewed efforts were made in this direction after the school attendance committee had written to Whitehall saying that it could not operate the 1891 Act. In 1902, however, Earl Egerton led a deputation in person to the Education Department to ensure that the board would not be re-established. 'Happily', summarised the editor of the *School Board Chronicle*, 'there is only one Stockport', and 'The place is a standing example of the mischief and demoralisation of half-hearted and of reactionary legislation'.

These criticisms of many of the activities of the Cheshire school boards could be dismissed as political bias unless it could be shown that there were serious defects in the voluntary system which could only be corrected, after 1870, by the introduction of board schools. This, however, would need another paper, though most writers on the period would agree that if comparisons are made between voluntary and board schools on the basis of the quality of buildings, success in teaching, attitude towards corporal punishment, the numbers of children passing on to higher education, and simple attendance, the board schools seem to be superior on every count. They were also free from erratic siting and arbitrary refusals to teach certain children.

The voluntary schools themselves were, in any case, no longer independent of the state, and few of them could have survived into the twentieth century without the government grant. They were also content, in the main, to accept money from the rates as payment of fees of poor children.⁴³ As the century closed, a greater percentage of voluntary school income came from the state and from parental fees, while voluntary subscriptions fell accordingly. Birkenhead schools in 1885-6 received fifty *per cent* from the state, forty *per cent* in fees, and only ten *per cent* in voluntary contributions, at a time when considerable pressure was being put on the town to avoid having a school board.⁴⁴ By 1892 the voluntary contributions had fallen to six *per cent*. In 1891, when thirty-two voluntary schools in Cheshire received no voluntary help at all, and thirty-seven others received less than £10 *per annum*, Joseph Chamberlain attacked Macclesfield in the Commons, claiming that any state which supplied between 90% and 97½% of the cost of the schools should have a share in their management.⁴⁵

⁴³ The nonconformist schools in Stalybridge, however, refused to accept money from the rates for a short time.

⁴⁴ Figures for Chester and Stockport were, respectively, 45%, 35%, and 20%; and 46%, 50%, and 4%. (*Statistical Report of the Cross Commission*, pp. 200-9.)

⁴⁵ *S.B.C.*, XLVI, 1891, pp. 64-5.

What, then, was the argument all about? Was it simply a case of each denomination struggling to preserve its freedom to raise a new generation in its particular faith,⁴⁶ or a local manifestation of the straightforward national political struggle? Did Cheshire see herself as the last stronghold of *laissez-faire* against the encroachments of the Victorian state? Clearly there were elements of all three, but none in itself is enough to explain the sometimes comic, sometimes tragic situations which occurred during the period. In Stockport, some hundreds of Protestant children were educated in Roman Catholic schools, because their fees were the lowest.⁴⁷ The teaching of religion in voluntary schools declined when no government grant was available for the subject.⁴⁸ In Stockport, Roman Catholics were urged by their priest to vote Tory, while a few miles away in Stalybridge, they voted Liberal, and petitioned the Education Department to keep the school board in existence.⁴⁹

A further element remains to be examined. J. M. Lee has noted that 'School boards were completely democratic bodies',⁵⁰ by which he meant that this was the only period in our history when the educational system has been controlled by bodies which contain no *ex-officio* or aldermanic element. When the school boards were established there was still a widespread assumption that elementary education was for the lower orders only, and given as a form of charity, whereas a school board could legally consist entirely of working class representatives. In Cheshire, the appearance of such members on a school board gave rise to alarm. The *Macclesfield Courier and Herald* called the working man's candidate of 1886 'a disturbing element in the lines of the opposing parties' and although, or perhaps because, the working class candidate was top of the poll, his new colleagues made him respectable by getting him on to the town council, and persuading him to live in a superior part of the town. Few working class representatives appeared to take advantage of their new opportunity, though at Stalybridge at least, they showed 'great interest and much excitement' at the first election.⁵¹ This was hardly surprising as even the Liberals in Cheshire put up a very poor struggle. Two Liberals only are worthy of mention in this context.

J. O. Nicholson, a manufacturer of silks and embroideries in Macclesfield, was a consistent and often solitary opponent of that board's policies for over twenty years.⁵² From 1872 when he refused to vote for the payment of fees to voluntary schools until the board ran its own, Nicholson objected to the low standards of education, the low exemption age, and the niggardliness of the rate-conscious

⁴⁶ N. J. Richards, 'Religious controversy and the school boards 1870-1902', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, XVIII, No. 2, June 1970, pp. 180 ff.

⁴⁷ *S.B.C.*, XXI, 1879, pp. 590-1, and W. Leigh's evidence to the *Cross Commission*, 3rd Report, pp. 155-160.

⁴⁸ Evidence of Mr. Hugh Parker, chairman of Birkenhead school attendance committee to the *Cross Commission*, 3rd Report, pp. 196-210.

⁴⁹ I. J. D. Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 205; *S.B.C.*, XXII, 1879, pp. 452, 610.

⁵⁰ J. M. Lee, *Social leaders and public persons*, 1963, p. 50.

⁵¹ *Macclesfield Courier and Herald*, 21 January, 1871.

⁵² *Cheshire at the opening of the twentieth century*, edited by W. T. Pike, 1904, p. 192. His career would be worth a more detailed investigation.

members. 'Sink expense', was his answer, 'when you are talking about the minds and souls of the little ones'.⁵³

Better known as a champion of state education was Sir John Brunner of the Brunner Mond Alkali works at Northwich who, while not a board member himself, showed a keen interest in the welfare of the children of the area.⁵⁴ His was the encouragement behind the formation of the Moulton school board, resisting the bishop of Chester's efforts to start a new voluntary school thus: 'Refuse with all your strength to have another school in which the children of Church people shall be petted and feasted, whilst the children of Dissenters are sent empty away . . . there is no other way for you of securing equal kindly treatment of all except a School Board'.⁵⁵ Four years later he faced the bishop again, this time at Barnton, and summarised the whole left wing position then and since by explaining that 'The Bishop proposes a clergyman's school; I propose a people's school'.⁵⁶ As an M.P., Brunner was responsible for an abortive bill to legalize school board expenditure threatened by the Cockerton judgment,⁵⁷ and successfully amended the 1902 Education Act to retain for the new Local Education Authorities control over voluntary schools which had been surrendered to school boards since 1870, and to include as a national, rather than a local responsibility, the education of blind, deaf, and dumb children.

Nicholson and Brunner were foremost among the few who insisted that Cheshire should benefit from the opportunities offered by the 1870 Act and subsequent legislation, but their pleas fell on a deaf or impotent audience. I would respectfully suggest that on the evidence presented in this paper, the Chester Archaeological Society should commemorate the 1870 Act, but has no cause to celebrate it.

Appendix—list of records of Cheshire school boards.

In the County Record Office, Chester.

CED 1	Dukinfield, oddments only.
CED 1	Stalybridge, good, 1882 onwards.
CED 6	Runcorn, minutes etc. 1875 onwards.
CED 7	Macclesfield, good, 1871 onwards.
CED 10	Congleton, minutes, 1901-03.
SL 145/1	Weaverham, Acton and Cuddington, minutes 1901-3.
SL 149	Wimboldsley, Clive and Occlestone, minutes 1849-1903.

⁵³ *S.B.C.*, XXVI, 1881, p. 484.

⁵⁴ S. E. Koss, *Sir John Brunner: Radical plutocrat, 1842-1919*, 1970.

⁵⁵ *S.B.C.*, XLVIII, 1892, p. 492.

⁵⁶ J. M. Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁵⁷ The Cockerton judgment, 1901, was given by Mr. T. B. Cockerton, government auditor, who upheld the accusation of the London Technical Education Board that the London school board had acted illegally in using money from rates to support secondary education in higher grade schools. See S. J. Curtis, *History of Education in Great Britain*, 1968, pp. 314-5, 760.

In Stockport Borough Library.

T 16 Stockport school boards records, 1871-1879.

In Birkenhead Borough Library.

Printed proceedings of the Birkenhead school board, 1893-96; 1899-1903.

Photograph of first members of the Birkenhead school board, 1893.

