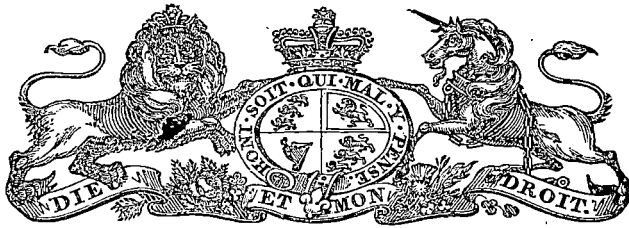


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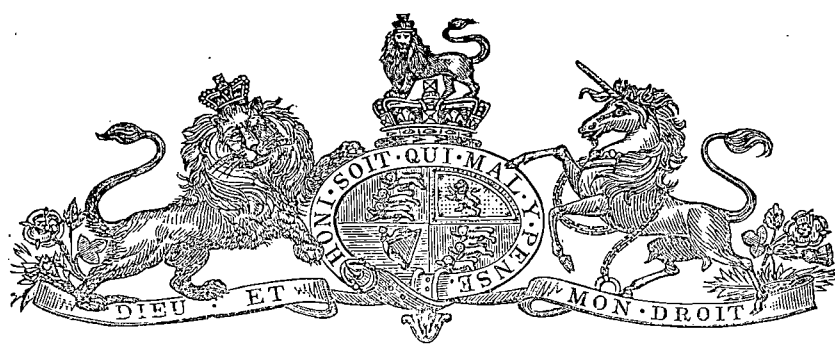
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PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA.

SACRED HISTORY LESSONS IN STATE SCHOOLS :

SPECIAL REPORT OF THE SENIOR INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS, WITH
MEMORANDUM FROM THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION.

Presented to both Houses of Parliament by His Excellency's Command.



SPECIAL REPORT on Sacred History Lessons in State Schools, and on the Question of Free Primary Education, by JAMES RULE, Senior Inspector of Schools.

AMONG the class subjects of instruction specified in the Regulations, "Sacred History" is one that requires more than a passing mention. Clause 19 of the present Education Act (1885) has an express provision to safe-guard children from the teaching of clergymen or other religious teachers who are not of their own (? parents') religious persuasion, and also provides that, "*in case of the non-attendance of any clergyman or religious teacher during any portion of the period agreed to be set apart for religious instruction, such period shall be devoted to the ordinary secular instruction in such schools;*" and in the Regulations published 25th June, 1887, in pursuance of the Act, it is provided that *the time set apart for religious instruction by clergymen or other duly appointed religious teachers may be the first or the last half-hour of each school-day, or from 2:30 to 3 P.M. on each school-day.* The same Regulations mention "Sacred History" among the subjects in which teachers must instruct the children. So the inference seems to be clear that "Sacred History" is intended to be classed as a secular subject of instruction, though it is puzzling to imagine what, if any, is the difference in meaning of the terms *sacred* and *secular* in this connection. But to teach Bible History as a secular subject brings a teacher into difficulties. Many parents as well as teachers regard it as religious teaching; and, as wide divergences in doctrines and creeds are justified by the different ways in which some of the Scriptural statements are accepted (literally or metaphorically), and by the different shades of meaning given to certain words, it is hardly to be expected that every teacher will be able in his explanations to avoid biasing children's minds in the direction of his own opinions. Some recommend Bible reading without note or comment in the State schools, forgetting that, without explanation on certain points, children would be in danger of gross misconception, not only with regard to facts of science, but also with regard to the discrimination of right from wrong in matters of conduct.

In the Regulations of June 27th, 1887, (now in force) there is no mention of the time that must be devoted to Sacred History; but several teachers have been specially informed that the subject must be taught *during some stated portion of the first hour of the school-day*, because, it is asserted the clause bearing on this matter in the Regulations published by the late Board of Education in 1878 has not been expressly mentioned as superseded by the present (more recent) Act or the Regulations published in pursuance thereof. Teachers generally have not been so informed; and some of them, giving only the same amount of time to Sacred as to English History, do not conform to what they naturally have been considering as an obsolete regulation, a portion of which is certainly inconsistent with the letter and spirit of the present Act. The clause (referred to) of the old Regulations reads as follows:—"*In every Public School the hour from 9 to 10 A.M., or a stated portion thereof, shall be set apart for general religious instruction by the Teacher in Scripture History and Narrative. Teachers are especially directed to ascertain the views of parents in reference to the attendance of their children at the time of such instruction, and not to allow any child to be present contrary to the objection, in writing, of its parent or guardian.*" The Board's Regulation thus required Public-school Teachers to act as *religious teachers*; while the present Act implicitly excludes them from this function; otherwise the last sentence of Clause 19 (above quoted) has no meaning.

The exclusion of children of "other religious persuasions" is not generally practised, except that in some cases Roman Catholic children during the half hour devoted to Sacred History are kept in a separate class-room, at work indisputably secular, or, in the absence of this accommodation, they are allowed to run free out of doors. This prominence given to sectarian distinctions among children attending the same school is to be deprecated. Still, where Roman Catholic and Protestant children, or even where Protestants only, if they are of different churches, have Bible instruction together, opportunity is afforded to any teacher whose religious zeal overmasters his discretion and sense of justice to warp their minds in the direction of his own particular creed.

Notwithstanding all the difficulties in the way of religious instruction in State Schools (for, quibbling apart, teaching in Sacred History must be considered religious instruction), many well-

meaning persons, recognising the importance of a good moral training for children, and believing that such training is impossible without a knowledge of the Bible, hesitate as to the advisability of making the schools entirely secular; though the only just alternative to this course would be a complete cessation of State expenditure on primary education. The adherents of no one particular Church have a right to demand that others shall pay for the teaching of their particular doctrines. But this is virtually what is demanded by the majority of those who persist in requiring that Sacred History shall be retained as a State School subject; for if a teacher were to treat it as history generally is treated, sifting out what he considers the proved and probable from what, in his opinion, is legendary and improbable, he would cause grave offence to those who still believe in the infallibility of all Scripture. On the other hand, there are many intelligent and worthy persons who read and appreciate the Bible without accepting all its statements and the doctrines based thereon as true, and strongly object to being stigmatised as "infidels" or "unbelievers" on that account. Nevertheless, with a system of unrestricted Bible instruction in State Schools, it is almost certain that belief in every word of that Book and in the doctrines of popular theology would be mentioned by some teachers as essential to salvation, and unbelief in them stigmatised as a mortal sin: and the so-called unbelievers would be, as taxpayers, helping to pay for the propagation of a doctrine they utterly repudiate—viz., that of eternal damnation on account of unbelief. The opinion that there can be no sound moral training without religious or theological sanction is by no means universally held, many students of history holding, on the contrary, that the evolution of morals has been retarded quite as frequently as advanced by religion and theology. But to orthodox parents it is of comparatively small importance which is the correct view in this matter, for they would not be obliged, even if the State Schools were secularised, to leave religion and theology out of their children's education. If they themselves were unable to impart the instruction they consider needful, their clergymen doubtless would be glad to do so, or find other duly appointed religious teachers, the free use of the schoolrooms being continued as at present.

The question of free education has been practically shelved in this country since the present Education Act came in force five years ago; but the recent news of the English Government proposing to make free primary education general in England naturally suggests hopes to its advocates here. I have no doubt but that if our State schools were made free to the children of rich and poor parents indiscriminately, a very great improvement would result in popular education. The attendance generally would improve, and in many thinly-peopled districts, where schools at present cannot be kept up to the minimum average necessary to justify their establishment or continuance, the addition of the children from four years' old to seven, and those above thirteen to the number *between* seven and thirteen (the statute age for compulsion) would make an attendance sufficient to satisfy the law. In many cases poor parents decline to send children not within the age for compulsion because of the expense, notwithstanding the importance of their attendance to the maintenance of a school for any of the children. It is undeniably a heavy burden for a man supporting a large family on thirty shillings a week or less to have to pay half-a-crown or three shillings a week in school fees. The case of many working farmers, both lessees and proprietors, is even worse, their net incomes being often less than those of hired labourers. The argument, already answered, but still frequently repeated, that *because under the present pauperising system of "free certificates" the attendance of those so admitted is generally irregular, therefore, if all children were admitted free without pauper certificates all would be equally irregular in their attendance*, is very fallacious. In the first place, it is not true that all the free-certificated children attend school irregularly, and in the second, it is not a correct inference that those who fail to attend regularly do so because their admission is free. A concomitant circumstance is not necessarily a cause. There is a considerable percentage of the poor who should be looked upon as respectable, having fallen in "fortune's strife" without deserving censure, and many of these set a good example to richer neighbours by the cleanliness of their children, and the regularity of their attendance at school. It is those parents who keep themselves poor by their own vices, and prefer pauperism, whose children swell inordinately the number of irregular attendants, and they would be still more irregular if fees were demanded of them without a strict enforcing of the compulsory clause. Again, in objection to free education, the opinion is often expressed that a teacher depending for his living wholly or partly on fees will probably be more diligent in his work than one not so dependent; but it is obvious that under a compulsory system this argument can apply only to teachers whose schools are sufficiently near one another to be in competition, which is the case with only a very few of the State Schools, and even in these, as well as in the schools generally, my observation does not justify the conclusion that a teacher's zeal and ability are in all cases properly indicated by the amount of his fees. Some of our good teachers, but more of the inferior, are sharp men of business, and manage to obtain nearly the whole of their legal dues; others, equally able and zealous as teachers, fall far short of doing so because they have not yet learned to "set the face like a flint" in dealing with poor people. In large schools the teachers can afford to be generous in remitting fees, but those with small salaries in charge of small schools cannot afford such generosity, although many are addicted to it, while others unwillingly forego their just claims because the wrangling necessary to secure them is very injurious to their proper work.

I have, &c.

J. RULE, *Senior Inspector of Schools.*
18th May, 1891.

MEMORANDUM by the DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION in reference to the *Special Report of the Senior Inspector, 1890.*

Sacred History.—On such a subject as Religious *v.* Secular education there is naturally a great diversity of opinion. It is clearly inexpedient for public officers to enter unnecessarily into controversial discussions, but, in the present instance, it seems desirable that the policy pursued by the Education Department in connection with the subject should be properly stated.

From the earliest days of public education in Tasmania the principle of the maintenance of an unsectarian as opposed to a denominational system has always been upheld by those who from time to time have administered the school system. Under the Board of Education provision was made for what was then called "general religious instruction," which was given by the teacher as a part of the ordinary school course, but the attendance of children at the time of such instruction was optional with the parents. Provision was also made for "special" or denominational teaching by Ministers of Religion under certain restrictions. The practice of the Board in this matter was identical with that of the Public School System of New South Wales while under a Board, and the principle on which this practice was founded was re-affirmed in both cases when the Board was superseded by a Minister, in Tasmania by "The Education Act, 1885," and in New South Wales by "The Public Instruction Act, 1880." In both Acts the instruction to be given by the Schools is defined as "non-sectarian," and, where the term "secular" is used, it is in contradistinction to "religious" or "denominational" instruction. In New South Wales the lessons given by the clergyman and the teacher respectively are still defined as "religious instruction" and "general religious instruction;" in Tasmania the term "religious" is now confined to the instruction given under special restrictions by a Minister of Religion, and the daily lessons given by the teacher are included by the Regulations in the non-sectarian instruction under the name of "Sacred History," a term that was purposely introduced to prevent any possible misconception as to the object and scope of such lessons. Whether it would not have been well for the Act to be more explicit on the subject is beside the question. The Act was known to have been introduced to carry out the principles of the existing system under different management, and it has been so interpreted by the Ministers who have controlled the Department when necessary modifications and improvements have been under their consideration. Mr. Rule says that "Teachers have not been generally informed" as to the practice to be followed in regard to the teaching of Sacred History. Shortly after the passing of the Education Act a circular was issued by the Minister of Education to all State schools directing the teachers to be guided by the old Regulations until they were superseded. Inquiries have been made by teachers and others as to points of detail, and they have been informed, under the authority of the Minister for the time being, that the old practice was to be continued; that the first half-hour of each day was to be set apart for lessons in Sacred History and Narrative to children whose parents did not object to their attendance; that the instruction was to be strictly unsectarian; and that no text-books may be used that have not received the approval of the Minister of Education. It is certainly true that this definition implies that the principles of the Christian Religion, in the widest sense of the term, are to be taught, and if this is inconsistent with a State School system there is an end to the matter. If, however, it is still considered desirable that the children should be educated on those principles, the subject of Sacred History must be retained in the school course. There are thousands of children who have no other means of receiving any useful instruction of the kind, and, even where there is a weekly or monthly visit of a clergyman for the benefit of his own flock, his teaching cannot be of much avail unless based upon the results of general instruction by means of the daily lessons.

As a matter of fact, there is no practical difficulty in the matter with the State Schools as a whole, unless it is created from outside. In my own experience of over thirty years among hundreds of teachers and schools of all classes, I have met with few teachers who were not honestly anxious to deal with this subject in a thoroughly unsectarian spirit to the best of their several abilities, and I do not think that many out of the whole body would consider the system one that affords an "opportunity" to any teacher to warp the children's minds in the direction of his own particular creed. Mr. Bourdillon and Mr. Masters, who have both had long and varied experience among schools, have often testified to the value of these lessons in Sacred History. At the present time there are many schools in which the daily lessons are attended by children of all religious denominations to their mutual benefit, and in which sectarianism, for the time being, is a thing unknown. I do not contend that the scheme as now worked, any more than other branches of the system, is free from defects, but the movement up to the present time has been in the direction of improvement.

Free Education.—There are many apparent and some real advantages to be gained by teachers under a system of free education, and as the tendency of the times is to abrogate personal responsibility and throw it upon the State, it is probable that a way will be found ere long for dispensing with the payment of fees in State schools. The advantages gained by the teacher's partial dependence upon the parents of his scholars, while he is protected from their interference with

his work, are not always seen by those who have not been behind the scenes to see the working of both systems, but they have to be considered. As a set-off against the advantages of fixed salaries there are the checks and restrictions imposed where free education has been introduced in order that the State may be assured of receiving full value for money paid, and though the teacher has a more certain income he has less scope outside that limit for improving his position. I entirely concur with Mr. Rule in the desire which he expresses for ameliorating the condition of teachers and poor parents, but I cannot admit that a change in the system would operate in the way described in his Report. Where a great increase of scholars has followed the introduction of free education it has been chiefly caused by the closing of private schools, the teachers of which were "starved out," and it is curious to notice how little sympathy with the sufferers is shown in such cases by the general public, intent only on its own gain. The result of the inquiries that I have to make from time to time into cases of non-attendance points to the desire to make a profit out of the children's labour, and the culpable indifference of some parents to their children's interests, as the two chief causes of absence from school, though want of suitable clothing is often given as an excuse. None of these causes has any direct connexion with the question of free education. It must not be forgotten that any parent who cannot afford to pay the full rate of school fees, and does not choose to accept free certificates, can have his children educated at the reduced rate of threepence per child per week, and this he can claim not as a matter of favour, but as his right. There are many other reasons besides poverty which prevent parents from sending very young children to school, especially in the country districts. In the towns, if school fees were abolished there would be a large increase, and new schools would have to be built, but in the country districts generally the attendance would, as now, depend chiefly on the efficiency of the schools, and the means employed for enforcing the compulsory system. Teachers' incomes would be more equalised under free education than they are under a system which allows unlimited increase where it is practicable, and if the incomes of some were raised those of others would have to be cut down. The increased expense to the State could not well be estimated until the general outline of the new system had been defined, but it would be very considerable, both in the cost of administration and of the maintenance of schools; but that is a matter of secondary importance if the real interests of the community are certain to be advanced thereby.

T. STEPHENS, *Director of Education.*
4th September, 1891.