

Girls' Schools and Teachers

Pedersen, Joyce Senders. "Schoolmistresses and Headmistresses: Elites and Education in Nineteenth-Century England." *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1975, pp. 135-162.

Along with family governesses and paid companions, ladies who kept private boarding or mixed boarding and day schools

138

in early 19th-century England were members of that anomalous social category-- poor ladies obliged to work for pay. The position of such women was ambiguous, for ladies were not poor and did not engage in paid employment. While men might undertake certain categories of paid employment yet retain their claim to gentle status in the mid-Victorian lady was still almost by definition a leisured woman, who sheltered life amidst her family, her social contacts largely to her social equals and dependents.

Insofar as private schoolmistresses could claim elite their claims rested primarily upon their ascriptive characteristics. Such prestige as they enjoyed derived mainly from those traditional patterns of status in which the hereditary rank of parties took precedence over the nature of the service rendered determining the status of an employment. It was in the first stance the circumstance that she was supposed to have been a lady and was thereby presumed fit to associate with other that entitled the lady who taught to a certain consideration. Lady-teacher's skills (her artistic and linguistic accomplishments, her mastery of etiquette) were obviously not irrelevant status. However, whereas modern professional groups have their claims to elite status in the first instance on their possession of skills and techniques acquired through a course of intellectual training, the connection between the lady-teachers' skills status was rather tenuous and indirect. Often it seems such teachers' accomplishments were valued more for the indication they gave that the woman in question was well-born than

139

any promise they held of her effectiveness as an educator.¹⁶ Further, so long as there were no recognized examinations and degrees students or for teachers, it was difficult to judge a lady's attainments or her skill in imparting them to others with much precision. Career patterns within the occupational group reflected the values of the ladies who taught. Since their leisured ideal defined paid employment as degrading rather than enhancing their status, ladies were said to turn to teaching only from economic necessity. Unwillingly recruited to their work, they tended to retire if an opportunity arose. Ladies who taught in early 19th-century England had undergone no special course of training for their work. No training institutions existed for such teachers. There were no nationally recognized degrees. Since in their case prestige attached to amateur status, to have educated these women in some unconventional way would have been to unfit them for their work in setting them apart from other ladies. [...]

140

The content of the education they gave was in keeping with both the privatistic values and the private interests of the ladies who taught and reflected their leisured ideal. The accomplishments that dominated the curriculum were also the most profitable subjects to teach. The two core subjects, music and French, were supplemented with a great variety of others, the number of subjects offered generally increasing with the rank of the school.³³ In addition to English subjects, history, geography, arithmetic, needlework, and religious instruction, the better provincial schools offered drawing, dancing, the piano and vocal music, German, and some sort of scientific lectures, while in highly fashionable establishments in London and southern England instruction in Italian and the harp was also commonly found.¹ Not only was much the larger portion of the students' study time devoted to the more decorative studies, but also the teachers treated potentially serious subjects of scholarly inquiry in such a way as to make them seem merely ornamental. Critics lamented, for example, the unscientific way in which French was usually approached, with no regard being paid to general principles of grammar, and complained that as it was taught the subject had little value as an intellectual discipline. [...]

143

That these accomplishments rather than reading, writing, and arithmetic dominated the curriculum was in keeping with the teachers' leisured, ornamental ideal. They aimed to fit their pupils to adorn a drawing room, not to spend time in the kitchen or behind a shop-counter. For purposes of shining in polite society and attracting a husband who could afford to give her a leisured life, a facility in music, dancing, and French was seemingly more functional to a young lady than great skill in computation or an easy familiarity with the nicer points of English grammar. The curriculum reflected and reinforced the amateur character of the lady who taught. Since the number of subjects attempted in these tiny schools was very large and ladies who taught seldom specialized, it could scarcely be hoped that these women would possess more than a passing acquaintance with the various subjects offered.

144

¹ Lowood Institute is obviously not fashionable in this sense, nor is it located near cosmopolitan London in the South. It is modelled after Cowan Bridge School in Lancashire, in the north of England.