Series on Quaker Schools, Inventors, Scientists, and Entrepreneurs

“The Rise of Dissenter and Friends Schools”

This is the first in a series of articles that will explore several topics on 17th and 18th century Friends schools and Quaker inventions, scientists, and entrepreneurs. This article sets the stage for the series by describing the historical events and background that gave rise to Dissenter schools in England after the restoration of Charles II in 1660.

England’s state- and church-controlled educational system included the two universities, Oxford and Cambridge, dating back to the 12th century. The grammar schools arose in the 7th century. Both sets of schools were founded and controlled by the Church. Education was regarded as a branch of Church work. The Church determined curriculum & placed even private schools under its control. The curriculum was the trivium – Latin, logic, and rhetoric – with most of the emphasis on Latin. When the Tudor rulers discovered that the new learning spawned Puritanism, they removed it from the curriculum.

The Renaissance generated an interest in the classics and nature. Studying classical works on math and science plus the renewed interest in nature created a demand for more practical education. After the ancient science was absorbed, Renaissance scientists turned to experimental science – finding their own new knowledge rather than assuming that the ancients had discovered all that was worth knowing. These trends came with the radical idea that everyone should have access to education, not just the upper class.

The French humanist, educational reformer, and Protestant convert, Peter Ramus (1515-72), was largely responsible for the view that instruction in the sciences should be part of education. Ramus declared that all that Aristotle wrote was wrong, that Aristotelian philosophy was inadequate, and that adherence to medieval methods was responsible for the slow growth of knowledge.

Another key personality was John Amos Comenius (1592-1670). He was a Czech teacher, educator, and writer. He was the last bishop of the Unit of the Brethren, a branch of the Hussite movement. Comenius was a religious refugee, one of the earliest champions of universal education, and is considered the father of modern education. He advanced textbook design with his Orbis Sensualium Pictus (1657), which was the first successful use of illustrations in teaching. His outline for a modern school system can be clearly seen in the American public school system today.

Quakers entered the picture when George Fox began his ministry in 1647 at the age of 23. He was just hitting his stride when the Puritans and Oliver Cromwell took over the government of England and beheaded Charles I on 30 January 1649. Cromwell was tolerant of other religions. George Fox had an interview with him in 1654. In 1657 Cromwell (the

1 A comment on terminology: Dissenters were those, such as Friends and Unitarians, who refused to practice the Anglican religion. Nonconformists included all dissenters plus those who would not accept the 1662 Prayerbook, or had difficulty with episcopacy. These included Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and (later) Methodists.
Protector) ordered the release of imprisoned Quakers and instructed judges to tolerate Friends “as persons under a strong delusion.” The ranks of Quakers grew to 60,000 by 1660 in this environment.

The Puritans encouraged the new learning and the adoption of experimental methods instead of scholastic philosophy, but the development of the sciences came from outside the Universities. In 1660 the Royal Society was formed. It became the center of the scientific movement. But the movement had to deal with deep-seated prejudices. Many saw all sciences, including mathematics, as Black Arts -- a view supported by theologians.

The environment that had favored the development of science and Quakerism changed radically with the restoration of the monarchy. Even though Charles II was tolerant and asked for mercy, Parliament was bent on vengeance and the restoration of Anglican control. Four of the acts that were passed from 1661 to 1665 were collectively called the Clarendon Code after Edward Hyde, the First Earl of Clarendon. They included:

- The Corporation Act (1661) required all municipal officials to take Anglican communion.
- The Act of Uniformity (1662) required schoolmasters and household tutors to subscribe a declaration that they would conform to the liturgy and obtain a license from an Anglican bishop.
- The Quaker Act (1662) required swearing an oath of allegiance to the king, which Quakers, of course, would not do. This act in particular put many Friends in jail.
- The Conventicle Act (1664) forbade conventicles (a secret meeting for worship) of more than 5 people who were not members of the same household.
- The Five Mile Act of 1665 showed that the Act of Uniformity was not working. It forbade nonjuring ministers to reside within five miles of a corporate town. Nonconformists were forbidden to teach; the penalty was £40. It also called for bishops to inspect teachers.

All together, these acts excluded Nonconformists from holding civil or military office, and prevented them from being awarded degrees at Oxford or Cambridge.

While it is clear that thousands of Friends went to jail because of these laws, some of them were short-lived and ineffective. The Conventicle Act was repealed in 1689. Most of the Five Mile Act's effects were repealed in 1689; it was formally abolished in 1812.

The courts also mitigated the effects of some of these laws. In the 1670 Bates Case the court struck down the requirement for a schoolmaster to obtain a bishop’s license. This led to the creation of many new Dissenter academies. In 1700 the Cox Case limited Church control to the grammar schools. In 1714 the courts exempted elementary schools from Conformity.

Even with the sometimes limited effectiveness of some of these acts, historian Irene Parker asserted that they had a disastrous and far-reaching effect on public education, pushing

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2 Charles promised religious toleration in his “Declaration of Breda” in April 1660.
back reform nearly 200 years.\(^4\) However, the demand for quality education was still strong, so Dissenter academies sprang up. Plenty of ejected teachers were out of work, and they set up many of the first academies in from 1663 to 1690. Nonconformists would not send their children to the Anglican/public schools that had gone back to teaching a much less practical curriculum, so they sent their children to the new academies. Even some Anglican parents who wanted a better education for their children sent them to Dissenter academies.

In economic terms the rise of the Dissenter academies was driven by both supply and demand. Ejected teachers had little else to do, and teaching at private schools was one of a restricted number of professions still open to Dissenters. The demand for a practical education and interest in the sciences had been growing since the Renaissance.

In our next article we will explore how Quaker schools may have been outstanding, even among Dissenter schools.