

H-Net Reviews

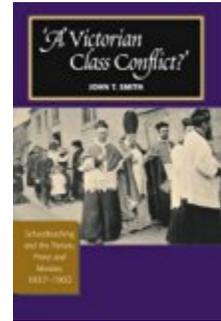
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John T. Smith. *A Victorian Class Conflict? Schoolteaching and the Parson, Priest and Minister, 1837-1902*. Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009. viii + 233 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84519-295-2.

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Published on H-Education (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik



Building on his previous work on the history of education and Methodism, John T. Smith's new monograph explores clerical attitudes toward and involvement in nineteenth-century English elementary education, particularly the office of the teacher. Though Smith also pays attention to the attitudes of teachers toward clerics and examines how teachers experienced heavy-handed clerical management of elementary schools, Smith is at his best and is most original when writing from the clerical perspective. The result is a welcome new take on clerical-teacher relations, which historians of education have tended to write from the perspective of the teacher, often with little sympathy for or understanding of the clergy. This book offers a further corrective to previous scholarly work by exploring not only Anglican schools, clergy, and teachers but also those of Roman Catholics and Methodists.[1]

Unsurprisingly, the (Anglican) parson, (Roman Catholic) priest, and (Methodist) minister all saw the provision of elementary education as part of their duty and as a means of advancing their denominational interests. Parsons reached deep into their own pockets to fund schools, some spending a third or more of their salary while many major landowners in the parish donated little or nothing. Priests similarly sacrificed to raise money for schools, devoting much time, energy, and social capital to secure donations. Both parsons and priests viewed an active role in the management of schools as an extension of their duty to help provide education and as a right, given the sacrifices they had made, their high level of education, and their role as spiritual leaders. Ministers, whose appointments were itinerant and lasted only three years at a time, played a comparatively small role

financing and managing elementary schools, tasks left to lay members of the congregation.

As major financial backers and active managers of schools, parsons and priests could and did impose "extraneous duties" on teachers (p. 47). In a chapter that constitutes the first systematic study of clerical impositions on teachers, Smith demonstrates that parsons and priests often required teachers at their schools to play the organ at church services, promote church attendance, and teach Sunday schools. Some advertisements for teaching positions placed by clerics even required that the applicant be a married man with a wife who was prepared to supervise infants in school and teach needlework to girls for no salary. Clerics imposed these duties and requirements on teachers and their wives because they considered them important tasks that would, owing to financial exigency, otherwise go unfilled. Ministers, by contrast, lacked the power to impose extra duties on their teachers, but teachers often took them on willingly.

Several chapters are devoted to exploring the changing social status of teachers and clergy over the course of the nineteenth century. Scholars have already explained the rise of teachers' status vis-à-vis the parson as a consequence of improved teachers' training, higher salaries, and union agitation for professional recognition. Smith shows that the rise of teachers' professional status was only one side of the story, that the status of parsons, in particular, also declined during this time, owing to financial troubles and falling educational standards. Clergy also came to recognize that teachers, by way of their education at teacher training colleges, had a pedagogical expertise that they lacked and needed to respect.

The final, full chapter explores the influence of the clergy within school boards, the elected local government bodies that raised funds and set policy for state schools from 1870 onward. Smith argues that parsons and priests got elected to school boards as a way of protecting the interests of their denominational schools in the face of nondenominational state schools. Ministers, given the itinerant and temporary nature of their work, were not elected.

A Victorian Class Conflict? is a somewhat misleading title for this excellent monograph. This is not the history of a “class conflict,” not least of all since teachers’ associations and unions appear only occasionally in the text. There is also a pronounced tendency to draw examples from the country rather than towns and cities (despite Great Britain’s population being mostly urban from the mid-century onward); male rather than female teachers (despite women coming to dramatically outnumber men in teaching by the end of the century); and the first twenty years of the sixty-five years under study (despite the dramatic growth in the number of both denominational and state schools and teachers after 1870). Smith

is clearly more at home among primary sources written by the clergy, and secondary sources written about them. For instance, he describes the reports of school inspectors, school managers’ minute books, and teachers’ log books as “largely ignored sources of evidence,” when, in fact, they have been mined by historians of education for many decades (p. vi). Several key secondary sources are also overlooked, including Dina Copelman’s 1996 monograph, *London’s Women Teachers: Gender, Class, and the State, 1870-1930*, which actually is about class conflict. Nevertheless, Smith has given historians of Victorian education a much-needed fresh perspective on clergy-teacher relations in Britain.

Note

[1]. See, for instance, Marjorie Cruickshank, *Church and State in English Education: 1870 to the Present Day* (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1963); Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (London: SPCK, 1980); and Peter Gordon, *The Victorian School Manager: A Study in the Management of Education, 1800-1902* (London: Woburn Press, 1974).

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Citation: Christopher Bischof. Review of Smith, John T., *A Victorian Class Conflict? Schoolteaching and the Parson, Priest and Minister, 1837-1902*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

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