‘Some weird animal’

Alfred James Swinburne, school inspector

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Abstract

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the limitations imposed by the restrictive payment-by-results curriculum were gradually relaxed, and many members of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate were able to welcome the opportunity to focus their efforts upon supporting schools, teachers, and even individual pupils. This article looks at the work of A. J. Swinburne (1846-1915), an inspector for over thirty years in Lancashire and Suffolk.

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A school inspection could be an intimidating and even terrifying ordeal. Joseph Ashby recounted his experiences as a pupil: ‘One year the atmosphere of anxiety so affected the lower standards or form-groups that, one after another as they were brought to the Inspector, the boys howled and the girls whimpered’.[1] All the same, there are enough indications both from what inspectors themselves wrote and from reading logbooks that not all inspections were like this. D. R. Fearon’s guide[2] to conducting an inspection, written on official request in 1876, says: ‘Managers and teachers ought to look forward to the visit of an inspector … with hope, and an expectation that he will suggest means of overcoming difficulties and amending defects’ (p2). Fearon suggests that the inspector should be able to observe the children working normally and as ‘cheerily and naturally as possible’ (Fearon, p9).

A surprising number of inspectors wrote personal memoirs – I’ve got at least four and I know of more. Probably the most personal of all is *Memories of a School Inspector* by Alfred James Swinburne.[3] Personal indeed – I imagine Swinburne was the only member of Her Majesty’s Inspectors before or since to feel it necessary to take his revolver when making a visit to an area of aggressive Irish Catholics. He was an inspector for thirty-five years, initially in Lancashire but for most of the time in Suffolk.

The social gap between inspectors and teachers was always wide, but it wasn’t until reading Swinburne’s book that I began to grasp just how wide it was. To start with, he was a landowner with the means to fund publishing the book as a vanity project, and there is an arrogance and a pervading sense of entitled privilege that makes much of the book rather uncomfortable to read today. He spends a considerable part of the first chapter recounting his family history back to the fourteenth century, while his time as an Oxford undergraduate was leisured enough to involve a vast amount of sport,

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including hunting and steeplechasing with others of his ilk.

This was a man who could not only afford to run a chauffeur-driven car but do without insurance, being perfectly happy to buy a new one when it became a write-off. He takes train journeys with generals, and stays with the lord lieutenant. Time after time he writes disdainfully of those beneath him socially – 'peasants', servants, and even parents. In every case his belief of his own superiority is plain.

To be fair, he could also be pretty scathing about those whose social standing was closer to his own. Many of those who were foolish enough to offer him hospitality will have regretted their generosity. He recounts not just one or two, but several occasions where the food or the wine or the accommodation or the servants fell below the standards he felt acceptable for someone of his importance.

He retired, at the age of sixty-three in 1911, considerably against his will; indeed he returns several times to his lasting resentment at not being granted a year's extension to his service.

Ahead of his time

Unexpectedly, beneath the patrician surface the book eventually reveals someone who not only cares deeply for ordinary pupils, but is well ahead of his time. Indeed, many of his views are such that you have to wonder if any of today's inspectors who showed such independence would be able to keep their jobs. However right wing his background and social life, his professional views were such that he could be asked: 'Are you a liberal?' – to which he would give the magisterial reply, 'Madam, I am an Inspector of Schools'.

He railed against lessons which were nothing more than learning by rote lists of historical dates, geographical features, and parts of speech and English grammar (he asked an eight-year old if he knew anything about Nelson – 'Please, sir, we haven't got to verbs').

His accounts of teacher-controlled lessons where the children had to respond with the approved one-word answer – with contributions of their own, however insightful, being rejected – could still be used with students today. A feature of these accounts is the way children keep trying to guess what's in the teacher's mind, and continue to do so enthusiastically even when their ideas are rejected brusquely ('No – no – you silly girl', ' Nonsense, you stupid creatures!', 'Sit down, you naughty child!', 'How can you be so stupid, you silly girls?', 'Dear, dear, what can you be thinking of?').

Swinburne frequently mentions corporal punishment, and every example he gives shows it in a negative light. In many cases, children are punished for not understanding something that the teacher has explained badly in the first place, or because s/he has failed to organise the class appropriately. He claims that corporal punishment has long been practically dead in elementary schools, though in several cases he finds that there are teachers whose actual practice differs from what they claim – where when he claps

to applaud a child's answer pupils cower in terror as soon as he raises his hands. In what clearly refers to a horrific case, he writes cuttingly of boys who have the audacity to fall on to spiked railings.

For Swinburne it is not the building and the facilities that define the school, but the children and indeed the teachers within it – 'School exists for the child, not the child for the school'. He reflects: 'Sympathy, gently lifting over difficulties and stimulating to self-help, which is of the essence of true teaching, has its full weight now'. This was in the 1890s – in the middle of his career – when the era of payment by results was finally over.

He sees the teacher as a supporter and a guide to pupils who, after all, are the ones who do the actual learning. There are indications that he believes learning should be active and indeed practical – when he needed to measure the school building he got four pupils to do it (after all, measuring is always a problem-solving activity), and he recounts the absurdity of a gardening lesson consisting of children silently reading a gardening manual rather than actually doing anything outdoors.

He recognised that 'we do too much for children', and talks of a teacher who 'speaks for them, she thinks for them, she almost breathes for them'. On his retirement he advises teachers, 'for your own sakes, as well as theirs, do not do too much'.

As the nineteenth century came to an end, education entered an unprecedently progressive era, and Swinburne was fully in sympathy. Today's teachers might welcome the official 'Blue Book' advice that prominence should be given to methods, rather than results, and that teachers should go beyond requiring children to give correct answers and no more. 'They now', says Swinburne, 'need to demonstrate understanding of how a calculation works, to give examples illustrating a factual statement'.

For Swinburne, this means the responsibility of assessing children is now the teacher's – 'The teacher can now choose for himself the best forms of assessing children's progress'. This, he felt, was a significant reason why he found children happy to be in school; he has no doubt that the change is wholly beneficial. 'There is no question as to the difference in the happiness of the child … a real abiding taste for intellectual pursuits'. Parents too report the benefits – they no longer have to complain of arithmetic cards being worked in children's sleep.

All the same, he is realistic enough to be concerned that even though the rigid focus upon basics of the payment-by-results system had weakened considerably, the authorities were in danger of relapsing to what he calls 'the cruel rites of the 3R percentage fetish, as they already worship a horrible percentage fetish in the manner of attendance'.

The Prize Scheme

Swinburne spent the vast majority of his career in Suffolk, from about 1881 to 1911. This was a period of great change in schools, and he was at the forefront of many of these changes.

He was particularly proud of the East Suffolk Prize Scheme, which he initiated and led for thirty years. One aspect of the scheme brought teachers from different schools together to look at pupils' work reflecting the curricular standards across several schools. (This moderation aspect was unknown in any of the schools I taught in, and didn't become a general feature until relatively recently.)

He was particularly proud of the work generated for the scheme and its annual exhibition covering the full range of the curriculum, and many practical subjects as well. The work could be of such quality that it featured in the Paris exhibition of 1900, and pupils who took part in the scheme featured in stories in the national press and even the *Chicago Tribune*.

It was a matter of considerable bitterness and resentment that the local education authority (LEA) decided not to take over what had always been a purely voluntary scheme – even though the secretary of the education department in Whitehall applauded it.

Swinburne was not one to let a good grudge go to waste; he was never a fan of local authorities and officialdom, and this lack of support caused lasting resentment. He refers time and again not just to the failure to support his scheme, but also the refusal given to his request for a year's extension to his contract, even after a petition in his favour garnered 12,000 votes.

Teachers

By the end of the century, the role of the inspector had become much less the formal examiner and far more the supporter of schools and their teachers. Swinburne reflected this change perhaps more than anyone, and in a retirement speech to teachers he tells them: 'I am able to realise how much of England's history is in your hands'. In one of the closing sections of his book he referred to: 'My true friends – the teachers of East Suffolk … How often have I enjoyed the lessons given by East Suffolk teachers, and how much they have taught me'.

In many of his reports on visits he will often try to make his criticisms constructively, and even in the worst lesson he tries to look for good points. He sees a teacher give an awful geography lesson, but his feedback recognises 'she was made of the right stuff – teeming with many good points, especially heart – and far better for infants than clever people often are – but scarcely suitable for Standard III'.

After a mediocre lesson on the skylark, rather than attacking the teacher for insufficient preparation he commented drily: 'Rather meagre your account, wasn't it?'. The teacher felt able to reply: 'Well, you see, sir, I don't tell the class everything about it so as to cultivate their observation better'. On another occasion, he pointed out that mistakes were going uncorrected and the mistress claimed she: 'Didn't want to discourage him, sir'. I draw from such episodes some clear inferences about the nature

of his relationship with teachers. The teachers are prepared to offer their side of the case, even when he suspects them of sloppy work; he may be the face of authority, but it's a human face and not simply an authoritarian one.

On one occasion he must have been so friendly that the young female teacher misinterpreted some kindly questions as flirtation, and when he asked could she give a lesson on reindeer she simpered, 'I have one on clouds and mist but I have not one on rain'.

Swinburne reports that teaching is no longer synonymous with lecturing and emphasises that 'education' is derived from the Latin 'educare' meaning to draw out. Hence he says the role of the teacher is to draw out the mental faculties of children. He draws an analogy from a painting of a young woman using stepping stones to cross a stream with a small child behind her. She doesn't pick up or carry the child, but turns and supports, and reassures and guides so the child can complete the crossing herself.

In a retirement speech he reflects on driving to an inspection on a day when the weather was terribly stormy. He worried that the weather was so atrocious that no children would be present. In fact, everyone was there 'smiling and happy'. He recognises that this was down to the work of the two teachers 'with their hearts in their work'.

He compares the work of such teachers with those fighting for the emancipation of the black population of America. Teachers have to work against the prejudice of (a) magistrates, who frequently fail to enforce pupil attendance, (b) farmers, who'd rather children work for them than attend school (he tells how the board of one school discovered that the school had won an excellent report and promptly advised the teacher to find employment elsewhere!), and (c) teachers also have to work against the prejudice of parents.

Indeed, parents come lower in his rating than their children and teachers. Early in his book he claims that parents are only interested in money, even though he still finds it possible to say a good word for innkeepers and publicans. On a visit to an excellent school, a parent who complains his child is not being taught Euclid and algebra is disdainfully dismissed: 'It would be difficult to award higher praise to an elementary school'. Another objects that his child is not learning anything about Canada. Swinburne is equally cutting: 'Another feather in the master's cap – the year's course being Europe'. To a grumble about lack of discipline at the same school, Swinburne says: 'Presumably the parent is complaining that the children do not have long faces and are not trussed like fowls for cooking'. His support for this school is complete – he says it's one of the few where he always finds the teachers (head and assistants) out in the playground with the children.

Of course, Swinburne was fiercely right wing, but his respect for teachers meant relations with teachers' organisations could be better than might have been expected. He instituted a circulating library for teachers so significant that the king's sister agreed

to be the patron, and the National Union of Teachers suggested the scheme should be introduced in other areas, and indeed used this pattern to set up a library of its own.

The East Suffolk County Association of Teachers marked his retirement after thirty years in the county with a collection and presentation to him. This was a rather grand occasion, and called to mind the very personal tribute paid to him by one teacher:

> Still it seems to me, that his kindly hand,
> With the breath of his high endeavour,
> Has passed a blessing on this land,
> And aided the children for ever.

Children

The final chapter of Swinburne's book is devoted to children, and once he starts talking about them you can forgive him for everything – for all the snobbery and the arrogance to those he deems his inferiors. He met thousands of children every year, and of all the groups he writes about, it is children who come out by far the best. Almost without exception, whenever he mentions children it is in a positive situation – you almost feel a warm glow coming off the page: 'Artless simplicity and an entire absence of anything like bitterness, cynicism, or profanity'. Or: 'One of the most salient characteristics of childhood is a certain delicacy and even tenderness of sympathy'.

I can't think many inspectors made it so plain how much that being with children was enjoyable for both sides – 'The kind pity they have for an Inspector … They view him as they would some weird animal, that needs strange food, and loves to be petted and stroked'. An inspection by Swinburne was unlikely to be one of those where children howled and whimpered, even when he was assessing their learning: 'I always found that, in anything worth doing, children were my best friends. They never found fault with examinations'.

According to Swinburne, children are always keen to talk and answer questions and say how they're getting on in their work, and he points out that children do not bear grudges even when teachers make disparaging remarks – 'no one forgives quicker and bears less malice than children, especially in groups'.

The warmth is reciprocated; children like him just as much – 'I thought he was a kind gentleman … and I have done all in my power to please him. He has born *sic* with the children very well and I shall try to read well for him', and: 'When I go home I should tell my parents I liked him very well'.

Most impressive of all is the way in which he gets to know children as individuals. He speaks admiringly of a thirteen-year-old who has to get all the meals for her father and her two older brothers; she has to keep house, do the washing, the darning and all the chores, and still comes home from school full of pleasure from her lessons to tell her

parents all the interesting things she's learned.

And I was moved by another example of his deeply caring side. A father's ill-treatment had caused his wife to leave home; there was a rumour that she might be returning. Swinburne spent twelve hours hand-in-hand with the five children on the platform at Ipswich station waiting with mounting disappointment for her possible return. (His concern didn't end there; he kept in touch and records she eventually did come back – but the man's behaviour didn't improve and she left for good.)

I spent much of the first half of *Memories of a School Inspector* disliking him intensely, and if I'd ever met him in person I'm pretty sure I might have felt just the same. He's been called 'idiosyncratic', and there's no doubt about that, but he had the respect of the secretary of the board of education and the leading figures of the day, and it's difficult to feel ill of someone who could close his memoirs with: 'Adieu! My dear Suffolk children. I never told you … of all the good you and your teachers have done'.

Notes

1. Ashby, M. (1961) *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe 1859-1919*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2. Revd D.R. Fearon (1876) *School Inspection*. London: Macmillan and Co.

3. A. J. Swinburne (no date) *Memories of a School Inspector; Thirty Five Years in Lancashire and Suffolk.* Snape Priory, Saxmundham, Suffolk; London, McDougall's Education Company. All quotations are from this text unless otherwise indicated. The text of the second edition (1912?) is available online at: <https://archive.org/stream/memoriesofschool00swinuoft/memoriesofschool00swinuoft_djvu.txt>

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