THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: EXPERIMENT AND ENLIGHTENMENT

1. Early Experiments: William Gilpin and David Manson

The work of at least two educationalists, begun as early as the 1750s, foreshadowed some of the experiments usually ascribed to the new school of educationalists inspired by Rousseau. These pioneers were William Gilpin of Cheam School and David Manson of Belfast. Unknown to each other, they made some highly original reforms in school discipline, organization, and teaching method. Their innovations were the expression of a critical attitude to traditional forms of education, but neither Gilpin nor Manson was influenced by Continental theorists. They did not consciously start a movement, yet they were the pioneers of the whole progressive tradition in England. It is to William Gilpin that we turn first of all.

William Gilpin of Cheam School

William Gilpin, who became headmaster of Cheam School in Surrey in 1752, was the first English schoolmaster decisively to break with the public-school traditions of fagging, corporal punishment, and the supremacy of classical studies. Much of his work was a reaction against the moral atmosphere and authoritarian regime of these schools. He also believed that the work of public schools could be more closely related to society, or, more accurately, to that section of society to which his pupils would eventually belong. Many of his pupils he
expected to become ‘landholders, tradesmen and public officers’, and he was not averse from introducing commercial principles and practice into the school curriculum. ‘I consider my school’, he wrote, ‘in the light of something between a school to qualify for business, and the public school, in which classical learning only is attended to.’ He considered his methods a better preparation for life for the directing classes of society than those pursued in the more conventional classical boarding-schools.

Gilpin was opposed to the concentration on the classics and the lack of moral training found in these establishments. He believed that their pupils,

having lost the only kind of improvement they came in quest of, which is classical accuracy . . . leave school rude and unfurnished with ideas or principles, and if they have not the good fortune to fall into good company, their minds are ready to catch the first incidental impressions of vice or folly.

‘Let them candidly own’, he wrote of the public schools, ‘whether it may not be worth while to try some new method; and to endeavour, if possible, to bring early habit, in the common instances of life, to fight in the causes of virtue and good manners.’ Gilpin, far more conscious than most schoolmasters of his time of the importance of early childhood in the formation of character, was not content to pass over the bullying by older boys of the younger as ‘schoolboys’ tricks’; he believed that such practices, together with arbitrary discipline exercised by the masters, could lead to a permanently hardened cast of mind and might be the ‘foundation for knavery’ in later life.

With this critical assessment of the public schools in mind, Gilpin was determined to reform the organization at Cheam as soon as he was able. He had started teaching there, as an assistant usher, in 1750; two years later he was the principal assistant. The school was then conducted by the Rev. James Sanxay, whose wife, it appeared, was unwilling to undertake the duties connected with the domestic side of the establishment. Sanxay decided to give up the school, and made

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4 Gilpin, Memoirs, p. 128.