1 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 in the whole progressive tradition in England. It is to William Gilpin that I 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.'

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, and became principal of Cheam in 1752. His first 'new scheme', as he called it, was to frame a code of laws for the whole school, with specific punishments for each transgression. These laws were publicly read at stated times before the whole school, and also strictly observed by Gilpin himself. Punishments were, however, carried out by the principal, but a safeguard was added in that if he carried out the punishment more severely than the law enjoined, he would listen to complaints, and if a sufficient number of 'good witnesses' appeared, then he would recompense the boy who had suffered. In doubtful cases which the existing law did not sufficiently cover, or where the offence was not sufficiently proved, a jury of twelve boys were empanelled to decide upon the case.

These innovations, which foreshadow later schemes of self-government instituted by David Williams and the Hill family, were not justified on any of the theoretical or psychological grounds familiar to later educationalists. Gilpin merely hoped that by associating his pupils with the maintenance of school discipline he would accomplish two things — impress on the

---

3 Gilpin, Memoirs, p. 128.
5 Gilpin, Memoirs, p. 123.