THAT there was a social problem of education in the period following the Industrial Revolution was, as in the field of public health, the result of the distribution of wealth in English society. For those who could afford to pay the fees there was an educational provision leading to the universities, but for the mass of society there was a deficiency of educational opportunity. The rich could buy themselves out of the problems of squalor and ignorance, the poor could not and the state played little role in education. There were indeed only three ways of getting a state education, by being a cadet, a felon or a pauper, since the army, prison and workhouse did provide some schooling. For the rest there was the occasional attendance at charity or endowed schools supported by subscription, or dame schools, some of which were no more than child-minding establishments.

Underlying the whole education debate, however, was the pyramid structure of English society. The leisure of the few, the governing classes, depended on the labour and service of the many. Perhaps the poor should remain in ignorance lest they rebel against the way the social system worked. Just as the propertied classes opposed universal suffrage for fear that a mass electorate would not long tolerate the unequal distribution of property and wealth, so many feared that too much education might lead to disaffection. As an early eighteenth-century writer put it: 'If a horse knew as much as a man I should not like to be his rider.' The same idea was expressed more forcibly in an often-quoted Parliamentary speech against a bill of 1807 to instruct pauper children:

The scheme would be found to be prejudicial to the morals and happiness of the labouring classes; it would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture and other laborious employments to which their rank in society had des-
tined them; instead of teaching them subordination it would render them factious and refractory as was evident in the manufacturing counties; it would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books and publications against Christianity; it would render them insolent to their superiors.¹

In the same vein was the comment made later in the century, 'What caused the French Revolution? – books', and Bell the educationalist commented on the dangers of 'elevating by an indiscriminate education the minds of those doomed to the drudgery of daily labour above their condition and thereby rendering them discontented and unhappy in their lot'.²

Yet in some obvious ways the Industrial Revolution had turned this argument on its head, for the enormous growth in population and its concentration in the worst areas of industrial cities created a social milieu in which revolutionary disaffection was endemic. Some powerful antidote was needed to counteract the ideas of 'agitators' whose propaganda fed on the dismal ignorance of the labouring population. Much middle-class support for educational movements resulted from a desire to make sure that the 'right' attitudes and values were inculcated among the working classes, and such things as Mechanics' Institutes were patronised and directed by middle-class benefactors to this end. Social deference, knowing one's place, was then a basic virtue to be imparted in any educational provision for the masses, and the Christian religion was a close ally here with its message of humility and acceptance of one's lot in life – the inequity of this world being counterbalanced by the equality of the next. Even more important, the purpose of all education was to teach morality, and morality was based on Christianity: hence some form of religious instruction was central to any basic elementary education. Most of those concerned to promote the education of the working classes were anxious to continue the essentially voluntary character of English education. It should be provided by the charitable benevolence of those whose station enabled them to help the less fortunate.

These three characteristics – social deference, Christian morality and voluntaryism – were the key features of the educational provisions made by charitable societies in the early nineteenth century. Since religion was central, the Sunday school movement played a major role in the teaching of reading, often using the Bible as the sole text. Furthermore, since dogma varied within Christianity it followed that religious education would be fragmented denominationally. The basic