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EDUCATION IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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First published in Great Britain 1998 by

MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and London

Companies and representatives throughout the world

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-333-63643-5

ISBN 978-1-349-27233-4 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-27233-4

First published in the United States of America 1998 by

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,

Scholarly and Reference Division,

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN 978-0-312-21747-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jewell, Helen M.

Education in early modern England / Helen M. Jewell.

p. cm. — (Social history in perspective)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-312-21747-1 (cloth)

I. Education—England—History. I. Title. II. Series.

LA631.5.J49 1998

370'.942—dc21

98-7577

CIP

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07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98

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The well Educating of their Children is so much the Duty and Concern of Parents, and the Welfare and Prosperity of the Nation so much depends on it, that I would have every one lay it seriously to Heart.

John Locke, *Some thoughts concerning Education*, prefatory letter to Edward Clarke of Chipley, 7 March 1690

PREFACE

Everyone has ideas about education. Adults reminisce about subjects they liked or disliked at school, and popular or hated teachers, generally thinking less about the nature and ethos of the institutional side. Across the generations arguments range over falling or different standards, selective and comprehensive teaching, single-sex and mixed schools. Subtle and not so subtle changes pushed by governments nudging students towards, or driving them from, particular subjects in what is deemed national interest are acknowledged. Everyone who has been through the education process, and continues to have involvement in it as a parent, teacher or ratepayer, feels to have something to say about it. So education is controversial: socially, politically and religiously.

In its history, it proves equally full of controversy, though distance soothes. The nature of the subject requires care to avoid giving unintentional offence. Contemporaries made comments about the educational practices of classes, sects and races, meaning to be offensive in some cases, being well-intentioned in others, but often being equally ill-informed; it is not easy now to handle these justly, yet misleading to ignore them. Discrimination against women was so essentially part of the mindset of the times that it would do violence to the atmosphere to fudge this; equally anachronism may be committed in using a term such as 'feminist', bearing all its modern connotations, of a woman such as Mary Astell. In researching this book I found the diversity of viewpoints taken by individuals writing for different purposes in times of different educational fashions stimulating, but in writing it I found this variety a problem. It is clearly impossible to write a history of early modern education fair to all reasonable cases and causes yet short enough not to exhaust its readers' patience. At the same time an overall consensus interpretation would be bland to the point of boredom. I therefore present what follows as my unashamedly selective analysis of education in early modern England.

One of my convictions is that a survey of education is only valuable if it embraces all levels of educational activity going on at the time. I do not wish to concentrate on the academic elite, about whom much has been written already. I personally find the opening-up of literacy to ever more of the population a particularly interesting subject, but I confess I may err on the side of optimism in inclining to credit halting readers of this period with the motivation, time and opportunities to improve their skill. However I am not so naive as to suppose this would have been easy for them. Still, the pedlars carrying the cheap printed word into the northern fells impress me. I am unapologetic for attempting to raise the subject of women's education in all walks of life in this period, because I believe this is not just a fashionable focus now, but a worthwhile one given the available evidence. A surprisingly wide range of individual women demonstrated that they had been educated, if untypically. We need to know the typical but need not be restricted to it. My view of educational development is not an institution-led history. I believe the history of education is much more than the history of schools, and I believe that this is particularly true of periods before the advent of state-controlled education which was in England a feature of the nineteenth century.

The bibliographies indicate my indebtedness to over a century of writers on different aspects of the subject. Earlier works are no help if they cannot be obtained, and I am pleased to acknowledge here my appreciation of the unfailing efforts of the staff of the Sydney Jones Library, University of Liverpool, to facilitate my researches on this, as on earlier, projects. Michael Collinson, Gordon Forster, Barrie Dobson and Cecil Clough encouraged my earlier forays into writing on aspects of education in late medieval and early eighteenth-century England, and so gave me the confidence to accept Jeremy Black's invitation to write this book. I am pleased to record here my appreciation of all this help.

HELEN M. JEWELL