Crooked Lines : *God writes straight on crooked lines*

The Nantes Brothers in England and the subsequent London Province (concluded)

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Part 2b:Educational Mission

Just before the Nantes Brothers arrived, the 1902 Balfour Education Act altered the school landscape in England. Responsibility for schools was transferred from individual Boards to the Counties and County Boroughs, and the existing Elementary schools were encouraged to extend their leaving-age from 12 to 14. From the Catholic point of view the important change was that their Elementary schools became maintained. They received no central Government help with building costs until 1964 (after re-branding as Primary schools following the 1944 Act). However, from the beginning of the century their teachers' salaries and the running costs were covered by the relevant local authority. Diocesan schools improved enormously in consequence.

The 1902 Act also created a new class of school, the County Grammar School, for pupils transferring to secondary education at the age of 11, some on Scholarships and the rest as fee-payers. There was no provision for any kind of Voluntary sector. Catholic counterparts had to be built unaided and then to cover teachers' salaries and running costs. Moreover, they were expected to provide free places for those who had won Scholarships, but without payment from the local authority. This was the challenge being addressed by the Religious Orders of men and women in England. Arguably, it was their finest hour in serving the educational needs of the Church at national level.

It is not clear that the newcomers from Nantes understood the challenge even when, around the end of World War I, notable Old Boys of Br. Potamian such as Sir William Dunn (Lord Mayor of London) and Sir John Gilbert (Chairman of the L.C.C.) used the annual Sports Day platform at Beulah Hill to made impassioned pleas for Government help for Catholic secondary schools (cf. Battersby's accounts). Instead of joining the struggle to make provision for the growing numbers of young Catholic boys in urban and suburban areas, they provided large dormitories on the top floor of each of the three new wings progressively built in their first two decades, and filled them with boarders from home and abroad. It seems as if their aim was to create a 'Passy-Londres', to match similar boarding schools at Passy-Buzenval in France and Passy-Froyennes in Belgium. The school roll apparently remained a 50/50 mix of Catholics and non-Catholics at least until World War II.

One excuse offered is that "when the French Brothers arrived in England … they did not have paper qualifications as teachers and so could not work in 'Voluntary Aided' schools" (The Nantes Brothers in England, p.5). That reveals an underlying misunderstanding: at the time of their arrival, there were no such schools in the secondary sector. Moreover, the continuing lack of 'paper qualifications' entailed the more serious lack of relevant professional training. The practical effects are well recorded.

When French Brothers had first arrived in England in 1855, they were unemployable in the parish school at Clapham because, as untrained teachers, they had no claim to the Queen's Scholarships available for teachers' salaries. That lesson was soon learnt by the Brothers of various nations who followed them. By the time that Nantes Brothers took over Beulah Hill in 1909, national educational standards had improved, thanks in part to the powers of inspection granted to the Board of Education.

H.M. Inspectors visited the school in April 1913. In their Report they acknowledged that the fifteen French Brothers had received some training within the Order in foreign countries, but regretted that it had led to no University degree. "It is an even more serious matter that neither the Head Master nor any of his staff have had experience of work in any other English Secondary School, and that the Masters as a body are quite out of touch with modern developments of secondary education in this country." The basic conclusion in their Report was that "as an educational institution it is not at present possible to regard the School as coming up to a satisfactory standard of efficiency". They hoped that no effort would be spared to improve the position, in view of "an obvious demand – to a large extent a local demand – for a Secondary School of this type among the Roman Catholic community". This comment should have been a timely reminder that, whatever the reason for the closure of Tooting, a lack of potential Catholic pupils was not among them. It is unclear as to how the Report was received at the time - perhaps it was with Gallic suspicion of central Government. It certainly went unheeded.

H.M.I.s returned to Beulah Hill in June 1946, by invitation of the Br. Director according to Battersby, but in fact as part of an attempt to become a Secondary Grammar School following the 1944 Butler Education Act. As a starting-point this time, the Report underscores the fact that the school's catchment area was one "where secondary provision for Roman Catholic pupils is inadequate". However, the H.M.I.s were amazed to discover that "no one connected with the School seemed to be aware of the existence of the Report of that (1913) Inspection which made much the same suggestions as are contained in the present Report". These suggestions included creation of a Governing Body, provision of a Library, of adequate Science and Craft Work facilities, of proper organisation of courses, and a greater use of specialist teachers. The inevitable result was that the school failed to be recognised as efficient.

If Beulah Hill was its flagship, then the signal sent out to the young London Province was 'Mayday'. The Community history disguised the distress with the following comment: "It was found impracticable to become Grant-Aided because there was no guarantee whatever that we should get Catholic boys". One wonders into which category of ignorance this falls. So it came about that, in the South London area along with most Convent schools for girls, Wimbledon (Jesuit), Battersea (Salesian), Clapham (Xaverian), Blackheath (De La Salle) and later Bexley (Marist Fathers), all moved into their new Voluntary Aided status as academically-selective Grammar schools - but Beulah Hill failed so to do. It did however rapidly put its house in order, and achieved recognition as efficient in a follow-up inspection in 1950. In obtaining recognition, the other schools in the London Province would not make the same mistake.

"Free secondary education for all" was the theme of the 1944 Education Act. It is worth recalling that, when announcing it, Butler described himself as "the De La Salle of the present generation". Implementation of the Act took time in the post-war years and it followed the course of expediency suggested by the research of Sir Cyril Birt, by adopting the tripartite division into Grammar, Technical and Modern. The Grammar schools already existed. Relatively few Technical schools were provided. The main effort went into building Secondary Modern schools for the majority who would leave school aged 15. For the first time, building grants from central Government became available for Voluntary secondary schools, set initially at 50% of cost. The school-leaving age had been raised to 16 on the statute-book, but was not made universal practice until 1973.

"Free secondary education for some" emerged as the practice in the schools of the London Province in England in the post-war years. A meeting of leading Brothers in 1942 had called for the establishment of a gratuitous school for the poor, "in conformity with the spirit of our Holy Founder and traditions of the Institute, and in keeping with our vow of Gratuitous Tuition", but it remained a pious wish for a few more decades. However, after the 1944 Act many a local education authority (L.E.A.), confronted with a shortage of 11+ selective places for Catholic boys, turned to independent schools such as Beulah Hill, Southsea, Ipswich and Bournemouth in which to place them. As a result these schools grew from two forms of entry (2 f.e.) to three. When in 1958 there was a brief re-opening of the Direct Grant list, Br. Edwin McCarthy succeeded in placing Southsea on to it, with the effect that there was a means-test of parental income for its fee-paying students, with central Government covering any reductions. The Brothers on the staff there became fully salaried and, thereby, the first ones in the new Province to make National Insurance contributions and Superannuation payments, the lack of which for the other Brothers remained a woeful gap for up to two decades more.

In 1970 Br. Edwin also expanded Beulah Hill's intake to 4 f.e. with 95 of the new entrants on free places, marking its high point in the private provision for publicly funded 11+ places. However this mixture of 11+ free places with fee-payers was, in effect, a continuation of the national system in the years 1902-44 which had been superseded by the Butler Education Act. From my time in Ipswich in the second half of the1950s, I remember how we managed to make provision for Catholic 11+ boys from the whole of East Anglia, with the exception of the County Borough of Norwich. But as a modus operandi it was dated, and our independent status made it insecure. When back in Ipswich for a year in the mid-1960s, I became aware of major changes on the horizon. New Catholic secondary schools had opened across the whole area, and Essex, the main feeder L.E.A., had just lost its outer London Boroughs to the newly formed Greater London Council. At the national level, the slowing in the birth-rate following the post-war baby-boom offered the prospect of surplus school places. Raising the school leaving-age to 16 (RoSLA) was on the agenda, and with it the possibility of a fairer deal for all children by ending of the tripartite division at the age of 11. This became Government policy in 1965, when Circular 10/65 required L.E.A.s "to submit their plans for reorganising secondary education in their areas on comprehensive lines", heralding the end of academic selection at age 11.

The 1960s also saw a rethinking within the Church. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) encouraged Religious Orders to return to the charism of their Founders, and in consequence the Brothers' General Chapter (1966-67) addressed the issue in its Declaration. Its wish was that "the service of the poor (should) become once again a principal characteristic of the Institute". It is arguable that the prospect was not relished by a cross-section of the London Province; its closed system entailed a degree of insularity.

Br. Richard Allen had already begun a renewal of mission when he became Provincial in 1964. He involved his Province in the Approved School sector, when in 1965 London Brothers began to replace England Brothers in Market Weighton. He had preliminary discussions with the Diocese of Brentwood which later led to sponsoring, originally together with the Ursuline Sisters, a new Secondary school in Basildon, an overspill town for London East Enders. It opened in 1972. In the case of the Xaverian College in Brighton for which the Province had taken over responsibility in 1961, he agreed with the local Diocese on a transfer to the Sacred Heart Convent in Hove, as a step towards an ultimate merger with the adjacent Cottesmore School, a Catholic Secondary Modern.

When Br. Richard was elected Assistant Superior General in 1966, the baton for renewal passed to Br. Edwin McCarthy, who also represented the Province at both sessions of the General Chapter. Over the next 10 years, for part of which he was Auxiliary Provincial, Br. Edwin was the unassuming driving force for renewal. His first success was to secure

Croydon L.E.A. support for admission of Beulah Hill to the maintained sector, almost exactly 50 years after Dunn and Gilbert had called for their former school "to take its place in the national system of the country". Beulah Hill became Voluntary Aided on 1 January 1973, a year and a half before its re-organisation as a 6 f.e. school. The date was chosen by the L.E.A. to beat a Government deadline on RoSLA money, with which it covered its costs in equipping the new workshops. Br. Edwin also played a part in negotiations with the States of Jersey, which led to the annual block-grant paid to De La Salle College there. In the mid-1970s he led the negotiations with the Dorset L.E.A., into which County the Bournemouth area had recently been transferred. As a result, St. Peter's and the Diocesan Secondary Modern were merged into a single Aided school.

"All change is bothersome" wrote the Provincial of the late 1960s in his monthly letter and, certainly, the prospect of moving towards a more challenging environment was not universally welcomed by his Brothers. A number, particularly those with no Teaching Practice experience in other schools and structures, made clear their preference for things to stay as they were, but in reality this was not an option. An even more divisive factor was that the more conservative saw the changes as politically motivated and called those supporting them left-wing, whereas these latter could claim to be loyally interpreting 'the signs of the times'. Lack of cooperation with national initiatives is part of the tradition left by the Nantes Brothers, exiles in unknown territory, and it was probably reflected in the debate. Matters came to a head in the mid-1970s.

St. John's, Southsea, was affected in September 1976 by the ending of Direct Grant status nationally and by the ending of 11+ selection in its catchment area. It was seen with hind-sight that possibilities might have existed if St. John's had agreed in 1954, at the request of the Portsmouth Diocese, to become a bi-lateral school. By the mid-1970s, however, the Diocese had sufficiently developed its Secondary Modern to be able to cope. The Provincial Council was consulted in December 1974 and voted *nem. con.* for closure of St. John's, expressing the willingness to help with a new Catholic maintained school at Fareham should numbers permit. In the event, faced with the opposition of the Governors and of many parents, Br. Leo Barrington, Provincial, felt unable to wield the axe.

St. Joseph's, Ipswich, faced a different scenario. Selection was ending in most of the L.E.A.s it served including Suffolk, the new unitary authority. The boarding element faced the prospect of further shrinkage as the number of overseas servicemen's children diminished. The proposal of the Diocese (Northampton up to 1976) was for the school to become a maintained 14-18 coeducational Catholic High School for East Suffolk, with the possibility of a Voluntary Aided boarding section attached. The Provincial Council was consulted in early 1975 and voted by a 5-2 majority in support. After meeting with the Birkfield Community, Br. Leo again felt unable to proceed with the proposal.

It took time for the inevitable to happen in these two schools. The school roll in both cases has remained about the same in total numbers but now covers an age-range of 3-18, while the secondary school level has shrunk to 2 f.e. The more fundamental change is that fee-paying increasingly became the norm for the pupils, with the effect that the Catholic proportion of both students and teaching-staff has shrunk to around the 12% level, corresponding to the Catholic proportion of the national population (Catholic Directory, General Statistics). In terms of service of the poor, the development has headed in an opposite direction to the Lasallian charism as defined by recent General Chapters.

The separate Provinces of London and England were united in 1988 to form the Province of Great Britain. With access to the new resources this brought, financial support was then generously sunk into both the above schools in an effort to buy time. Contact with the East Anglia Diocese confirmed that there was no way back for Birkfield; the *kairos* had passed. And so in 1996 a new Trust took over the school and its property on a 50-year lease. Southsea, on the other hand, continues to be an integral part of the De La Salle Charitable Trust. It will be interesting to see what materialises if current (2008) proposals of the Charity Commission are carried through to deprive such schools of their present charitable status. It would seem to be an anomalous position for them to claim to call themselves Lasallian.

The Nantes Brothers who arrived at the beginning of the 20th Century deserve respect. They had faithfully chosen to remain associated together in the religious life, and to accept exile with no prospect of occasional home visits while they were of age for military service. They came from rural Catholic Brittany and found themselves, as they perceived it, in urban Protestant Britain. It would evidently be unfair to judge them by today's expectations, but the sad fact remains they made no effort to learn from the Province already existing in England. Their closed system of training and school management may have been appropriate for the time and place of their origin, but they clung to it regardless. The lack of a clear sense of local mission in secondary education suggests that perhaps they were more concerned with survival as religious than with service as religious educators. Somewhere in the equation there must have been an element of trauma. In spite of all the problems or perhaps because of them, the good Lord, who moulds with clay of all varieties, was able over a period of time to create some substantial works. Or, to return to our original analogy, we can affirm with Augustine that "God writes straight on crooked lines".