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***The End of Literacy: The Growth and
Measurement of British Public Education Since
the Early 19th Century***

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Abstract

The paper explores the significance of counting communication skills in one of the earliest societies to achieve mass literacy. The Millennium Development Goals in education reflect structures of practice and thinking rooted in the 19th century. The notion of a goal itself, the measurable output of official endeavour, belongs to the founding of the modern state. Literacy as an early performance indicator of public expenditure embodied a construction of an opposition between ignorance and knowledge, a disaggregation of social structures and a dismissal of informal education. It sustained the rise of the performance orientation of schooling, which subordinated the role of users. Despite their cultural limitations, the literacy and postal statistics permitted long-run quantitative analysis. There remains a question, to which historians do not have a privileged answer, as to whether education in its fullest sense is a goal that can ever be consistently measured over time and across space. The contemporary shifts in the meaning of literacy threaten to disconnect the term from history and disable our capacity fully to understand the dynamics of change.

Keywords: Education, Literacy, State, Schooling, Teachers, Nineteenth century, Quantitative measurement, Millennium Development Goals, UNESCO

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In his annual report for June 1839, Thomas Lister, the Registrar General of England and Wales, published the first attempt of a modern state to estimate the cultural capital of an entire nation. Alongside the tables of births, deaths and marriages he included a new measure of the country's health:

Almost every marriage is duly registered, and every register of marriage is signed by the parties married; those who are able writing their names, and those who are unable, or who write very imperfectly, making their marks. Therefore, an enumeration of the instances in which the mark has been made will show the proportion among those married who either cannot write at all, or who write very imperfectly.¹

The French had begun to enumerate the literacy of conscripts in 1827, but the sample was limited by age and class. The marriage registers offered a broader perspective: 'It may be said in favour of this criterion,' wrote Lister, 'that it is free from the disadvantage of selection, including alike every class and condition, and every age, except children and very old persons.'² Although Lister was by profession a novelist, and had been appointed the first Registrar General in 1836 on the strength of his involvement in an enquiry into education in Ireland, he had enough statistical common sense to be initially cautious about the stability of the data. It seemed intrinsically unlikely that the sum of contingent personal decisions should generate stable measures of education. However, the returns of the first three years were consistent enough to suggest that the registers might indeed constitute a reliable index. At this point they began to enter the public arena. In his *The Progress of the Nation* of 1843, G.R. Porter published an analysis of the returns by county, and from 1846 the annual reports of the Registrar General (no longer Lister, who had himself become part of the death statistics, succumbing to tuberculosis at the age of 42)³, listed them by each of the 324 Registration Districts of England and Wales.⁴ It thus became possible to draw in close detail the map of writing abilities across England and Wales (and by a separate process Scotland) and to measure its change year by year.

¹ Cited in G.R. Porter (1843). *The Progress of the Nation in its Various Social and Economical Relations, from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century to the Present Time*, Sections V–VIII (p.277). London: Charles Knight & Co.

² Porter, *ibid.*

³ He was replaced by Major George Graham, youngest brother of the serving Home Secretary, Sir James Graham. He held the post for 37 years.

⁴ Porter, *op cit.*, p. 279; PP 1846, XIX, pp. xxviii-xxx, 35-41.

In this paper I want to explore the significance of counting communication skills in one of the earliest societies to achieve mass literacy.⁵ Much of the debate around the achievement of the Millennium Development and World Education Forum Goals in education, as in other areas, revolves around the issue of quantitative analysis – what the annual trends mean, what constitutes data and how it is compiled and understood, what the relationship is over time between investment and output. The first observation of an historian of 19th-century Europe, coming upon these attempts to chart a path for developing countries in the 21st century, is the sheer familiarity of the categories that are being deployed. The process may be seeking to equip populations for the digital age, but they depend on structures of practice and thinking rooted in the last years of the stagecoach and the beginning of the railway era. The notion of a goal itself, the measurable output of official endeavour, belongs to the founding of the modern state. There is something to be learned from how learning was constituted as one of the world's first performance indicators of public expenditure. It is a matter of the judgements and exclusions which the tables embodied, and of their interaction with the delivery and experience of education.

The deliberate construction of consistent data-sets describing the condition of a society was a consequence, in the first instance, of the creation of a functioning state infrastructure. There are isolated instances of systematic record keeping, at least of reading abilities, which stretch back into the early modern period, particularly where protestant churches imposed obligations on their clergy to inspect the condition of their congregations. The most notable case was Sweden's Church Law of 1686, which required tests of the capacity of families to read the Bible. However it required the intervention of later 20th-century historians to translate this information into accounts of the literacy of the country as a whole.⁶ In France, a retired schoolmaster, Louis Maggiolo, was commissioned in 1877 to collect all available parish records to construct a back history for the information which was now being collected through marriage registers from 1854, and the census from 1866. His work in turn was not properly exploited until it was re-analysed by François Furet and Jacques Ozouf a century later.⁷

The systematic production of statistics which had meaning for their own era required the reform of government. The tables for England and Wales were a by-product of the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages Act of 1836, which replaced a decentralised system of parish registers with a standardised and effectively-policed national apparatus.

⁵ For surveys of this process see Cipolla, C. (1969). *Literacy and Development in the West*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin; Graff, H. (1987). *The Legacies of Literacy*. Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press; Vincent, D. (2000). *The Rise of Mass Literacy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

⁶ Johansson, E. (1988). 'Literacy campaigns in Sweden'. *Interchange*, 19(3/4), 135-162, reprinted in Lindmark, D. (Ed.) (1998). *Alphabeta Varia: Orality, Reading and Writing in the History of Literacy* (pp. 89-162). Umeå: Department of Religious Studies, University of Umeå.

⁷ Furet, F. and Ozouf, J. (1982). *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

The Act was designed to provide a secure basis for the attempts to understand the dynamics of mortality and population growth which had occupied pioneering statisticians for more than a century, and for resolving the increasing volume of disputes over the ownership of private property.⁸ The legislation was part of the fall-out of the Great Reform Act of 1832, which created a new legitimacy for government and led immediately to a series of modernising reforms in welfare, education, policing and public administration. There were, and have remained, intense debates about what the tables of marks and signatures signify, but neither at the time nor since has there been any questioning of the figures themselves. Whether or not brides had feigned illiteracy to avoid embarrassing illiterate grooms, the count of marks in the registers in every corner of the country was held to be fully accurate. The office of the Registrar General, whose duties expanded to include the decennial census in 1841, set a new standard for public statistics. Its formation was accompanied by the creation of the Statistical Department of the Board of Trade in 1833, headed by G.R. Porter, which commenced the collection of data on the rapidly growing economy, and by the efforts of the Home Office to compile crime figures on a systematic basis. The Reform Act State knew itself and proved itself through its capacity to count the condition its citizens.

The Reform Act emerged out of the most dangerous constitutional crisis Britain had faced since the Glorious Revolution of 1688. It was almost immediately challenged by the losers in the settlement, who were further outraged by its early legislation, particularly the New Poor Law of 1834. The initial set of marriage register returns coincided with the emergence of what is generally regarded as the world's prototype mass class conscious protest, the Chartist Movement, whose first and second petitions were presented to Parliament in 1839 and 1842. The invention of modern social statistics constituted a deliberate intervention in the political drama. It reflected a conviction that repressing information and its communication was no longer a tenable response for governments facing challenge from below. The attempts made during the Reform Act crisis to discipline the radical press had backfired, with journalists and printers using persecution to mobilise support for their cause. The post-reform Whig governments embarked on a strategy of liberalising controls and promoting what it understood as knowledge. The newspaper stamp, which had been designed to price political journalism out of the pockets of the lower orders, was reduced to a penny in 1836 and the tax on paper was halved a year later. *Hansard*, the official record of Parliament, hitherto available only to MPs and peers, was put on public sale in 1838. In 1840, written communication across the nation was promoted by the costly introduction of the Penny Post.⁹

⁸ Higgs, E. (2004). 'Life, death and statistics. Civil registration, censuses and the work of the General Register Office, 1836-1952'. *Local Population Studies* (supplement), 1-21; 51-56. Also, Cullen, M. J. (1975). *The Statistical Movement in Early Victorian Britain*. Hassocks, UK: Harvester Press.

⁹ The liberalisation of controls over communication is examined in Vincent, D. (1998). *The Culture of Secrecy. Britain 1832-1998* (pp. 3-4). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

The statistical analysis of society both reflected and directed the new strategy. In Porter's *The Progress of the Nation in Its Various Social and Economical Relations* – the first attempt to grasp the totality of the new industrial order through numbers – the pioneering review of the marriage register signatures appeared in a chapter on education, which was located in a section of the book entitled 'Moral Progress'. Related chapters covered crime, 'manners' (mostly the incidence of drunkenness) and postage. Porter summarised the challenge presented by his findings:

It must be owned that our multiplying abodes of want, of wretchedness and of crime, our town populations huddled together in ill-ventilated and undrained courts and cellars – our numerous workhouses filled to overflowing with the children of want – and our prisons (scarcely less numerous) filled to overflowing with the votaries of want, do indeed but too sadly and too strongly attest that all is not as it should be with us as regards this most important branch of human progress.¹⁰

The overall problem pointed to a principal cause:

It is seen, and is beginning to be practically acknowledged, that the greater part of the moral evil under which societies are now suffering is the offspring of ignorance, and without insisting on any very high degree of perfectibility in human nature, we may reasonably hope that the removal of that ignorance will do much towards restoring moral health to communities and thus fit them for the rational enjoyment of blessings so increasingly offered for their acceptance.¹¹

In the discussion of the marriage register tables, the term 'ignorance' stood as both a consequence and a description of the inability to read and write. Porter eagerly accepted the new opportunity to trace the variations in performance across the registrations districts.¹² As he moved west, he reached the scene of the Newport rising, where a recent attempt by Chartists to storm the town had been repelled by the army:

The proportion of ignorance in exhibited by Monmouthshire and Wales, where 48 in 100 males, and 69 in 100 females, were unable to write their names, offers a striking commentary upon the scenes of violence that were committed in that quarter in November 1839.¹³

¹⁰ Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, V-VIII, p. 172.

¹¹ Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, V-VIII, p. 173.

¹² The 1836 Act used as its basic unit of registration the Poor Law Unions created in 1834.

¹³ Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, *op cit.*, V-VIII, p. 281.

He and other contemporary commentators were particularly interested in the opportunity presented by the concurrent developments in counting signatures, which could be used as proxies for education, and crime, measured by prison inmates. The conclusions were stark. As an M.P observed in a debate on the introduction of the school inspectorate in 1839:

In short, two thirds of the children of the humbler classes were entirely without education. The consequence of this neglect was, that the criminal calendar was yearly increasing, and it appeared that out of 22,000 committals in the present year 20,000 were of persons wholly destitute of education.¹⁴

The construction of the opposition between ignorance and knowledge was fundamental to the meanings embedded in the literacy tables. If it embodied a liberal faith in the capacity of communication to promote rational behaviour it also constituted a sweeping dismissal of the entire structure of learning in the communities of the labouring poor. Sarah Trimmer, one of the earliest advocates of public education, explained the need for intervention: 'In Great Britain and Ireland at least 1,750,000 of the population of the country at an age to be instructed, grow up to an adult state without any instruction at all, in the grossest ignorance.'¹⁵ The first subsidised schools were not merely inscribing learning on the tabula rasa of young minds; they were actively combating the instruction received in the home. An early school inspector explained what was at stake as the children were taught their letters by the new generation of trained teachers: 'It is indeed a sad and evil necessity, if the first lesson which they learn at school is to beware of their own parents and to look with disgust, if not horror at the filthiness and abominations of their own homes.'¹⁶

The literacy tables were used not only to condemn but also to disaggregate the social structures of the labouring poor. In his report for 1857 the Registrar General drew attention to a fact that was being routinely ignored in commentaries on his tables. 'Each marriage constitutes a family; and to the family the fact that one of its members can read and write, is of more importance than the fact that both can read and write.'¹⁷ As he went on to point out, this meant that the binary tables of individual marks and signatures misrepresented the distribution of communication skills in society. Combining the performance of brides and grooms significantly reshapes the profile of change over the period. The average level of illiteracy between 1839 and 1914 was 25 percent, but taking

¹⁴ *Hansard*, XLVIII, 14 June 1839, col. 298. See also Rawson, R. (1841). 'An enquiry into the condition of criminal offenders in England and Wales, with respect to education', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, IV.

¹⁵ Bell, A. (1807). *Extract from a Sermon on the Education of the Poor* (2nd edn.) (p. 10). London: T. Cadell and W. Davies.

¹⁶ Vincent, D. (1989). *Literacy and Popular Culture. England 1750-1914* (p.73). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ PP 1857, p. v.

the partners together, literacy was to be found in 85 percent of marriages, and illiteracy in 36 percent. In the ceremonies two witnesses, usually close relatives of the principals, also faced the task of signing their names. If the extended family structure is considered, only one ceremony in 15 across the period was devoid of the skill of signing a name. On this basis, there is a case for arguing that England and Wales was a literate society by the time Queen Victoria came to the throne. Conversely, there was someone still signing with a mark in as many as 44 percent of the marriages.¹⁸ These networks contained the old and the young. As reading and writing was largely, though not exclusively, learned in childhood, a period of rapid growth separated the performance of age cohorts. In 19th-century England, one generation was on average 20 points more literate than its predecessor. In practice, this meant that in the neighbourhoods of the labouring poor, the elderly illiterates lived amongst the youthful schooled population, not disappearing from the returns until the post-1945 welfare state.¹⁹ It is necessary to go back to the registers themselves to reconstitute these communication networks – a painstaking task, requiring the modern paraphernalia of research grants, sampling techniques and machine-assisted analysis. Left to themselves, the published tables construct a society comprised of an aggregation of discrete individuals, displaying a personal level of skill or behaviour. The returns are at once statistically accurate and radically misleading, in respect of both the pace and the meaning of change.

The opposition between ignorance and knowledge embraced not just the capacity to read and write, but the means by which it was acquired. Although the early commentators chose to dwell on the scale of unmet need, the first marriage registers revealed just how much had been achieved without any kind of government intervention. The tables of signatures and marks reflected, on average, the attainments of children some 15 years earlier. They indicated that centuries of domestic, commercial and philanthropic instruction had achieved literacy levels of 60 percent for men, and nearly 50 percent for women. More detailed analysis of a national sample of the 19th-century registers, which contain information on the occupations of those in the ceremony, suggests the presence of writing skills throughout society.²⁰ Skilled artisans were almost universally literate and had been for generations, and even amongst unskilled labourers around one-fifth could sign the register. The advocates of reform, who achieved the first public subsidy for elementary education in 1833, were well aware of a thriving sector of what were termed 'private adventure schools', sustained by the pence of working-class families. They were convinced, however, that the instruction in reading and writing received at the hands of these untrained teachers was worse than useless. Porter observed that:

¹⁸ Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, *op cit.*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁹ Their presence is described in Richard Hoggart's (1957) classic account of inter-war Leeds, *The Uses of Literacy*. London: Chatto and Windus.

²⁰ Vincent *Literacy and Popular Culture*, *op cit.*, p. 97.

The reports of the Statistical societies of Manchester and London have shown how unworthy of the name of education is the result of what is attempted in the majority of schools frequented by the children of the working classes, and which are frequently kept by persons 'whose only qualification for this employment seems to be their unfitness for any other'.²¹

At the time he was writing, the official guess was that the two large church societies for teaching the poor their letters were reaching less than half the market for elementary education. As late as 1870, when the state finally accepted the responsibility for financing and controlling a national system, there may have been as many as half a million parents still choosing to pay untrained, unofficial instructors to teach their children.²² In presenting his Education Act, W.E. Forster described this sector as 'generally speaking, the worst schools, and those least fitted to give a good education to the children of the working classes'.²³

That parents persisted in making their own arrangements was a reflection of the ease with which a free market in schooling could flourish. Small groups of children were accommodated in the living space of widows or of workmen seeking an alternative to ill-paid and unreliable manual labour. School primers began to appear not long after the invention of the printing press, and by the early 19th century it was possible to purchase every kind of printed teaching aid, new or second-hand.²⁴ Above all, the untrained teachers supplied a cost-effective service to their customers. They were cheap; they delivered only basic instruction in reading and writing and did not attempt to impose a superstructure of moral education. Their hours of attendance were readily adjusted to the rhythms of the local economy and they negotiated with their customers as equals, not as figures of authority. The fragmentary evidence of working class autobiographies of the period suggest that even in small communities, parents faced choice and exercised it, moving children in and out of schools as their finances and domestic priorities dictated.²⁵

The only student of this sector calls these enterprises the 'lost elementary schools of Victorian England',²⁶ but they were not so much mislaid, as deliberately excluded from the public archive. To the official mind they stood doubly condemned. Not only were they run by the untrained and answerable to the uneducated but they professed no system

²¹ Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, *op cit.*, V-VIII, p. 274.

²² Gardner, P. (1982). *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England* (Ch. 2). London: Croom Helm.

²³ *Hansard*, CXCIX, February 17 1870, col. 441.

²⁴ Michael, I. (1993). *Early Textbooks of English* (p.2). Reading, UK: Colloquium on Textbooks, Schools and Society. For examples of primers in print across the period before public subsidy of elementary education see, Dyche, T. (1710). *Guide to the English Tongue* (2nd ed) London; Markham, W. (1738). *An Introduction to Spelling and Reading English* (5th ed.) London.

²⁵ Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, *op cit.*, pp. 66-72.

²⁶ Gardner, *op cit.*, *Lost Elementary Schools*.

and kept no records. The ability to count, to translate learning into numbers, was itself a key means of distinguishing the transmission of knowledge from the inheritance of ignorance. The consequence for our understanding of the period has been profound. Historians, bent on the teleological task of establishing the origins of the present-day schooled society, have too readily accepted the judgement of contemporary politicians, commentators and administrators that such forms of instruction were without value and without a future.²⁷ They have allowed their enquiries to be policed by the boundaries of the tables in the official returns. To do otherwise requires venturing into difficult, fragmentary and essentially unquantifiable evidence. Even so, the statistics tell us something. Not until 1880 were all parents legally required to send their children to an inspected classroom.²⁸ Advocates of compulsion had been resisted for half a century, partly because of doubts about the propriety of interfering in the domestic arena and partly because of uncertainty about the capacity of the local infrastructure effectively to police such a regulation. Up to this moment the decision to send a child to school, whether in the private or inspected sector, was ultimately at the discretion of the pupil's family. By that time the marriage register returns indicate that only five percent of the task of achieving a literate society remained. Any explanation of change needs to be founded in the aspirations and strategies of the users as much as the suppliers.

Amongst those who established the system of public subsidy of the church schools, a basic critique of informal education was its instrumental approach to literacy. Parents who employed instructors from their own community bought only the technical capacity to read and write. They were not interested in the superstructure of moral instruction, and still less in paying for instruction in the immense range of cultural, domestic and occupational learning which took place in the homes, neighbourhoods and workplaces of the labouring poor. In the debate over the creation of a system of inspecting the use of public funds in 1839, Lord Stanley emphasised that 'education was not a thing apart from and separate from religion; but that religion should be interwoven with all systems of education, controlling and regulating the whole minds and habits, and principles of the persons receiving instruction.'²⁹ The primers used in the early inspected classrooms concluded with lists of the hardest words in the Bible.³⁰ However, as the level of public investment steadily rose from an initial £20,000 to over half a million a year a quarter of a

²⁷ The summit of this tradition is represented by Smelser, N. J. (1991). *Social Paralysis and Social Change: British Working-Class Education in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

²⁸ Local school boards were permitted to set attendance by-laws in 1870, and required to do so in 1880. Workhouse children and some groups of factory children were subject to regulation from the 1830s onwards. When it finally arrived, compulsion was gently policed, particularly in respect of girls.

²⁹ *Hansard*, XLVIII, 14 June 1839, col. 238.

³⁰ Mathews, M. M. (1966). *Teaching to Read, Historically Considered* (pp.19-74). Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

century later, making it the third largest category of non-military spending,³¹ doubts began to arise about whether this broad conception of learning was sustainable. Following the report of a Royal Commission in 1861, Robert Lowe, Secretary of the Committee of Council of Education,³² set about modernising the system of inspected schooling with a steely realism.

It had to be understood, he argued, what the State was paying for. 'Our business is to promote instruction. However desirable more religious instruction may be, that is not the specific thing for which the grant is given.'³³ His essentially secular conception of literacy was founded on a commitment to what Lant Pritchett has termed a 'performance orientation' of schooling.³⁴ Ensuring that the masters subscribed to the tenets of one of the two competing denominations, and that the school was run on Christian principles, did not guarantee that the pupils learned their letters. On the contrary, the Newcastle Commission had established that 'even in the best schools only one-fourth of the boys attain the highest class, and are considered by the inspectors to be successfully educated.'³⁵ Public funding was for the benefit of the pupils rather than, as he put it, 'a grant to maintain the so-called vested interests of those engaged in education.'³⁶ And it should be for all the children, not just the most able or most fortunate. The teachers whose salaries were now subsidised by the public purse needed to recognise their task: 'We want to make them educate, not children in the first class, for that is done already, but those who now leave schools without proper education.'³⁷

At the heart of his reform was the question of how performance was to be calculated. After 1839, highly-paid and well-educated inspectors had made annual visits to each subsidised school, assessing whether the general quality of the establishment and its buildings was sufficient to justify the continuation of its grant. For Lowe, they were measuring the wrong thing by the wrong means:

I do not deny that quality is a very important thing, but when I come to a final system I cannot but think that quantity is, perhaps, more important ... I have come

³¹ Total public expenditure on education grew 25 times between 1833 and 1860. Other than the salaries of civil servants, it was ranked behind law and justice, and the post office. Mitchell, B.R. and Deane, P. (1971). *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (pp.396-397). Cambridge, UK: University Press.

³² Effectively the Departmental Minister.

³³ *Hansard*, CLXV, 13 February 1862, col. 216.

³⁴ Pritchett, L. (2004). 'Towards a new consensus for addressing the global challenge of the lack of education'. Centre for Global Development, Working Paper 43, 4. Also Filmer, D., Hasan, A. and Pritchett, L. (2006). 'A millennium learning goal: Measurable real progress in education'. Centre for Global Development, Working Paper 97, 9.

³⁵ *Hansard*, CLXV, 13 February 1862, col. 202.

³⁶ *Hansard*, CLXV, 13 February 1862, col. 211.

³⁷ *Hansard*, CLXV, 13 February 1862, col. 216.

to the conclusion that inspection as opposed to examination is not, and never can be a test of the efficiency of a system of national education.³⁸

Lowe was proposing to add to the marriage register returns a direct, quantitative score of literacy at the point of acquisition. The examination was to be of each pupil, tested one by one in front of the inspector, in the three skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. Part of the school's grant was to be calculated on the basis of the number of pupils, to reflect the volume of its labour, part on whether the teacher was certificated, as a measure of its professionalism, and the bulk on the performance of the pupils before the inspector, to indicate its effectiveness. No other part of the curriculum, whether spiritual instruction or lessons in subjects such as history or literature, was to be tested or paid for. He summarised his reform in a passage that was endlessly repeated in the wave of condemnation that his 'Revised Code' provoked in the educational establishment:

I cannot promise the House that this system will be an economical one, and I cannot promise that it will be an efficient one, but I can promise that it shall be either one or the other. If it is not cheap it shall be efficient; if it is not efficient it shall be cheap. The present is neither one nor the other. If the schools do not give instruction the public money will not be demanded, but if instruction is given the public money will be demanded – I cannot say to what amount, but the public will get value for its money.³⁹

The point was the final phrase. Literacy, together with numeracy, had become the key performance indicator of the most rapidly growing category of public expenditure. It had been placed at the centre of the contract between the taxpayer and the state.

Lowe's 'Revised Code' was swiftly imposed across the inspected school sector in 1862, a measure of his personal determination and also of the strength of the administrative machine that had been constructed over the previous two decades. At its heart was a particular axis between a conception of public education and a means of measurement. It was a brutal but provisional victory. Every succeeding generation refought the battles between the interests of the professionals and the needs of the children, between stretching the most able and leaving none behind, between focussing on key skills and engaging with the breadth of the curriculum. Yet the impassioned debates of the 1860s and thereafter concealed underlying convictions which were slow to change.

Chief amongst these was the attitude to the parents of the illiterate and to the schools they patronised. Lowe had flirted with the idea of extending the state subsidy to the unofficial sector, but concluded that this would be a 'reckless expenditure of public

³⁸ *Hansard*, CLXV, 13 February 1862, col. 203.

³⁹ *Hansard*, CLXV, 13 February 1862, cols. 229-230.

money'.⁴⁰ 'Those schools', he argued, 'are mere commercial speculations.'⁴¹ His reform embodied the beginning of a dialogue with parents, in that, as the preceding Newcastle Commission had established, it was clear that, left to their own devices, basic instruction in literacy and numeracy was what they wanted.⁴² But otherwise, neither he nor any of his critics had any intention of ceding authority to the users of elementary education. The matter was put bluntly in a pamphlet denouncing the Revised Code by one of Lowe's most vocal opponents, James Kay-Shuttleworth, for a quarter of a century the leading administrator in the construction of the modern system of mass schooling:

In like manner, the ignorant do not know their want. There is no power in those who are apathetic about learning to create or support schools. Among an illiterate people, there is no demand for education, and there can be no supply which depends on such demand. The instruction of a people hitherto trained only to manual toil cannot originate with itself.⁴³

A fundamental driver in the sequence of reforms, culminating in the introduction of compulsory attendance in 1880, was not the construction of a new system but the destruction of the uncountable and unaccountable sector, which the ignorant persisted in using. Compulsion meant that parents could be prosecuted not only for withholding their children from the inspected classroom, but also for sending them instead to private schools, and only at this moment, with universal nominal literacy in sight, were the unofficial teachers driven from the market.

The tables supplied by the marriage registers from 1839, and enriched by the school inspectors from 1862, reflected the model of government action which stretched across the educational establishment. Historians have to treat them with a mixture of dependency and rejection. On the one hand, they constituted consistent measures over time, generated on transparent principles and compiled with administrative competence. Unlike census and household data in other 19th-century and contemporary measurements which rely on self-declaration,⁴⁴ there was an element of objective performance. A wealth of debate over the marriage register signatures has established that they did generate a long-run indicator of capacities to read, which they understated,

⁴⁰ *Hansard*, CLXV, 13 February 1862, col. 199.

⁴¹ *Hansard*, CLXIV, 11 July 1861, col. 728.

⁴² *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the State of Popular Education in England*, PP 1861, XXI, pt. 1, p. 159.

⁴³ Kay-Shuttleworth, J. (1866). 'A sketch of the history and results of popular education in England; with some considerations as to the revised code'. In *Thoughts and Suggestions on Certain Social Problems* (p.148). London: Longmans, Green, and Co; reprinted (1973), Didsbury, UK: E.J. Morten.

⁴⁴ The data measured by the Education for All programme is derived from 'conventional cross-country data drawn from censuses or household surveys that rely on self-assessments, third-party reporting or educational proxies'. *Education for All by 2015. Will we make it? EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008* (2007) (p.62). Paris: UNESCO.

and to write, which they over-stated, although given the limited needs most working people had to use a pen in the period, not by as much as was sometimes feared.⁴⁵ Better still were the still relatively neglected statistics produced by the Universal Postal Union from 1875, which systematically measured not the possession of the skills of literacy, but their application.⁴⁶ By 1914 it was generating statistics of per-capita postal flows across the developed and developing world, together with a wealth of collateral detail which would enable the curious, for instance, to compare the number of post boxes in Sierra Leone (18) with Somaliland (five) and with British India (76,506).⁴⁷ By contrast, counting change in the later 20th century was hampered by the continual revision of the category of literacy, once the marriage register signatures had outlived their usefulness. The most significant official UK review of the state of post-war literacy, the Bullock Report of 1975, found itself unable to make any quantitative statement about achievement over time, because shifting standards prevented the creation of a 'firm statistical basis for comparison'.⁴⁸ And in the 21st century, the internet produces endless statistics at the point of use, but no consensus about their value for understanding the distribution of communication practices across societies so divergent in their technological infrastructure.

At the same time, historians are faced with a continued challenge to reach the cultures of the 'ignorant' and to estimate the scale and the consequences of their demand for education. Lowe's school examinations reinforced the conception of literacy as a personal possession. Reworking the statistics on a domestic basis, examining the practices of appropriating the skills and artefacts of literacy, taking stock of the depth of exposure to texts and the complex interactions between printed, oral and visual communication, it is possible to make a case that what Chris Bayly terms 'literacy awareness' was a universal condition in England before the state spent a farthing on teaching the poor their letters.⁴⁹ The problem then, as it still is, lies in integrating the national and transnational measurements of change with the local and deeply contextualised meanings and effects embedded in the uses of literacy. Contemporary

⁴⁵ Reay, B. (1991). 'The content and meaning of popular literacy: Some new evidence from nineteenth-century rural England'. *Past and Present*, 131, 113; Stephens, W.B. (1998). *Education in Britain, 1750-1914* (pp.26-27). Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.

⁴⁶ For accounts of the organisation see Coddington, G.A. (1964). *The Universal Postal Union*. New York: New York University Press; Menon, M.A.K. (1965). *The Universal Postal Union*. New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The value of its data for an understanding of the dynamics of mass communication is explored in Vincent, D. (2003). 'The progress of literacy', *Victorian Studies* 45(3), 405-431.

⁴⁷ Union Postale Universelle (1915). *Statistique Générale du service postal, année 1913* (p.3). Berne: Union Postale Universelle.

⁴⁸ Bullock, A. (1975). *Language for Life* (pp. 6, 16, 24). London: HMSO 4. On the post-war literacy surveys see: Start, K.B. and Wells, B.K. (1972). *The Trend of Reading Standards*. Windsor, UK: National Foundation for Educational Research.

⁴⁹ Bayly, C.A. (2008). 'Indigenous and colonial origins of comparative economic development'. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*, 4474, 19.

analysts of education programmes have at their disposal an enviable range of techniques for generating evidence,⁵⁰ but there remains a question, to which historians do not have a privileged answer, as to whether education in its fullest sense is a goal which can ever be consistently measured over time and across space.⁵¹

This paper has made an ahistorical use of the term literacy. In the middle quarters of the 19th century, the word itself had not been coined. Those who laid the foundations of mass education, and the means for measuring its output, deployed the old terminology of reading and writing. Although 'illiteracy' had been in use since 1660, 'literacy' did not enter the English language until as late as 1883 in the United States, and 1893 in the United Kingdom. In France the equivalent term for illiteracy, 'analphabétisme', was not coined until 1920.⁵² The word came into being to describe a specific instantiation of the practice of written communication. It referred to a condition that united decoding and inscribing letters. It was a personal not a social condition and essentially binary and quantifiable in its incidence. It was taught in specific institutional locations by a defined pedagogy, and it was dissociated from other forms of communication and all forms of learning gained outside the schoolroom. In the course of the 20th century, the term as an adjective was applied more broadly to mutually exclusive cultures, in which entire structures of cognition and behaviour were determined by the presence or absence of a command of reading and writing.⁵³ Although it came to be recognised that the condition could be varied by application to specific tasks, with the phrase 'functional literacy' gaining acceptance in the 1970s, it remained associated with the mass of the population rather than with high culture. Richard Hoggart's seminal *The Uses of Literacy* was about the readers of the popular press, not the writers of poetry and novels.⁵⁴

In this sense, the history of literacy has both a beginning and an ending. Its reign has lasted little more than a century. Over the last 20 years, the word has begun to slip its moorings. It is now being attached to an ever-widening range of practices. A cursory search produces arts, computer, critical, cultural, design, diaspora, ecological, emotional, financial, health, information, media, mental health, multimedia, physical, racial, and scientific literacies. In some cases, the original meaning of literacy as the capacity to decode written communication is being extended to engage with the products of the electronic revolution. 'Media Literacy', explains OfCom, 'is the ability to access,

⁵⁰ I note with interest that the new PISA survey is based on a six-and-a-half hour interview with each individual learner, a period which a 19th-century school inspector would have been granted to examine an entire school.

⁵¹ See for instance Lant Pritchett's definition: 'Basic schooling is a means to acquiring the skills and competencies that contribute to a fuller, more humane, and productive human existence.' Pritchett, 'Towards a new consensus', *op cit.*, p. 5.

⁵² My thanks to my colleague Jim Coleman for this reference.

⁵³ See for instance, Ong, W.J. (1982). *Orality and Literacy*. London: Methuen.

⁵⁴ Hoggart, R. (1958). *The Uses of Literacy*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

understand and create communication in a variety of contexts'.⁵⁵ The further it strays from specific technologies, the vaguer it becomes. 'Information literacy' is officially defined as the capacity 'to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information'.⁵⁶ Beyond the new media lie still more diffuse concepts. The notion of 'emotional literacy' has lately emerged as a key to conducting successful personal relationships, or to becoming an effective manager of organisations.⁵⁷ In this case, as in others, the antonym describes a more recognisable condition. 'I was raised', writes Claude Steiner, 'in a state of utter emotional illiteracy, as was expected of white middle class boys destined to become the professional men of my generation.'⁵⁸ In the classroom where the term was originally located, new applications are discovered. The schoolchild must now learn physical literacy, to become a 'person' who 'moves with poise, economy and confidence in a wide variety of physically challenging situations'.⁵⁹ Robert Lowe would be less than amused to hear his 21st-century successor assuring Parliament that in schools 'the Physical Education Programmes of study sets out – for all Key Stages – the knowledge, skills and understanding pupils need in order to be physically literate'.⁶⁰

Elsewhere I have protested this slippage of meaning.⁶¹ In *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* the word now is given as a synonym for skill: 'Competent and experienced in something specified e.g. computer-literate'. The displacement of a term derived from the ability to make objects by one derived from the ability to communicate may reflect a fundamental shift in our culture. It does not, however, assist in the long-run understanding of a specific capacity. I have sympathy with the view, if not the syntax, of the anthropologist Brian Street:

if we want to indicate that language, for instance, or literacy, as a particular instantiation of language, is always accompanied by/ associated with/interwoven with other semiotic practices, such as visual and oral, then it is better to name each of these channels, and to find ways of describing the relation between them, than to name them all as literacies. If they are all 'literacies', then we will

⁵⁵ Office of Communication (2004). *OfCom's Strategy for the Promotion of Media Literacy – A Statement* (p.4). London: Office of Communication.

⁵⁶ American Library Association's Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989). *Final Report* (p.1). Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

⁵⁷ Orbach, S. (1999). *Towards Emotional Literacy*. London: Virago; Bocchino, R. (1999). *Emotional Literacy: To Be a Different Kind of Smart*. London: Sage.

⁵⁸ Steiner, C. (2003). *Emotional Literacy: Intelligence with a Heart* (p.xv). Fawnskin, CA: Personhood Press.

⁵⁹ Whitehead, M. (2001). 'The concept of physical literacy'. *The British Journal of Teaching Physical Education*. See also, Maude, P. (2001). *Physical Children, Active Teaching: Investigating Physical Literacy*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

⁶⁰ Smith, J. (2006). *Hansard*, 20 March. Written Answers, col. 104W.

⁶¹ Vincent, D. (2004). 'Literacy literacy'. In, Graff, H.J, Mackinnon, A., Sandin, B. and Winchester, I. (Eds.), *Understanding Literacy in its Historical Contexts: Looking Backward and Looking Forward – Past Approaches and Work in Progress*, *Interchange* 34, (2 & 3), 341-357.

struggle to differentiate 'literacy'; as the reading/writing dimension of a semiotic practice from, say, or the oral or the symbolic dimension.⁶²

But on reflection I think the game is up. The shiny new library in my own university has equipped itself with a suite to teach 'information literacy', which means computers, not the codex. I register a mild objection with the librarian and she politely ignores me. The word cannot be put back into its semantic box.

Even where the term is being retained in accounts of development, the effort to free it from the constraints of its late 19th-century meanings is generating further confusion. The Education for All programme monitors the growth in literacy in developing countries in terms that Victorian educationalists would comprehend, publishing statistics based on UNESCO's binary measurement of individual ability or inability 'to read and write with understanding, a simple statement of their everyday life',⁶³ but then also recognises that 'literacy as practised at home and in communities typically differs from that valued by schools or the workplace,' and that literacy is 'a socially organised practice'.⁶⁴ 'A key feature' of OECD's PISA programme, the most sophisticated attempt to measure educational change in developing societies, is:

the innovative 'literacy' concept that is concerned with the capacity of students to apply knowledge and skills in key subject areas and to analyse, reason and communicate effectively as they pose, solve and interpret problems in a variety of situations.⁶⁵

The innovation represents a conscious rejection of the past:

The concept of literacy used in PISA is much broader than the historical notion of the ability to read and write. It is measured on a continuum, not as something that an individual either does or does not have. ... A literate person has a range of competencies and there is no precise dividing line between a person who is fully literate and one who is not.⁶⁶

The skill PISA is seeking to isolate and measure may be central to performance in the occupational and domestic arena, and the emphasis on the relativism of ability has much to be said for it. But whether terming it 'literacy' aids the understanding of contemporary

⁶² Street, B.V. (2001). 'Contexts for literacy work: the "new orders" and the "new literacy studies"'. In: Crowther, J., Hamilton, M. and Tett, L. (Eds.) (2001). *Powerful Literacies* (p.16). Leicester, UK: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

⁶³ *Education for All by 2015, op cit.*, p. 62.

⁶⁴ *Education for All by 2015, op cit.*, p. 66.

⁶⁵ Programme for International Student Assessment, *Learning for Tomorrow's World. First Results from PISA 2003* (2004). Paris: OECD (p.20).

⁶⁶ Programme for International Student Assessment, *ibid*, p. 23.

development programmes is open to doubt. There is gain as well as loss in retaining the meaning of a concept over time, especially one that has been subject to long-run measurement. Disconnecting the term from history disables the capacity fully to understand the dynamics of change.

There may be only two alternatives left to the student of written mass communication, whether in the old world or in developing countries. The first is to accept the dispersal of the original meaning and redescribe this field of learning and practice as 'literacy literacy'. The second is to revert to the language of those who constructed the modern apparatus of instruction and measurement. Reading and writing, *lire et écrire*, *leggere e scrivere*, have such long histories that attention is always directed to the context of their application. The terms imply two different communication skills, with a variable relation between them. They emphasise practice, foregrounding the connection between the actor and the text. And they make no assumption about how the skills were acquired, by whom or from whom. Literacy, when it can be deployed in its original form, can be understood as just another way of counting.

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