

Methodist Education and Sociopolitical Development in Montserrat

The absence of sustained missionary efforts towards the development of educational institutions for African slaves in the Caribbean has been documented.¹

A closer analysis, however, credits the Wesleyan contribution to education in Montserrat with being a significant agent of societal transformation, certainly by effect if not by design. This was in some sense linked to the movement's self-understanding related to its mission to spread scriptural holiness for the transformation of the nation.

While "the nation" referred in principle to Britain, the mandate to transform would, a century later, be extended to the Caribbean where the Methodist movement was pioneered in 1760 by Nathaniel Gilbert, an Antiguan born planter of British parentage, after his 1759 encounter in England with John Wesley. As early as 1809, Anne Gilbert had defied authorities and established a school at English Harbour in Antigua, from where Methodism made its way to the nearby island of Montserrat.²

In Montserrat as in the Leeward Islands generally, the Methodist missionary support for education was at odds with that of the Establishment which was essentially an extension of the Anglican Church and which fostered a certain parochialism that extended British ecclesiastical feuds into the Caribbean. The insistence on conformity to church discipline adversely affected the development of formal education which was vitally important to the social elevation of non- white populations. While the Wesleyans were intentional concerning a religious focus in education, they did not forcibly promote denominationalism in schools to the same extent.³

Methodism's direct involvement in primary education in Montserrat preceded the abolition of slavery, since general education classes had been conducted at Bethel in the east and at Cavalla Hill in the north west of the island since the 1820s. At Bethel a building for both day school and Sunday school existed before a chapel or a mission house to be occupied by Methodist missionaries.

One year after the end of the Apprenticeship system, in 1839, there were 50 and 56 scholars enrolled in newer schools at Salem in the west and Broderick's further south respectively. During that same year, the House of Assembly voted sixty British pounds to the Rev. Jesse Pilcher, resident Methodist Minister on Montserrat, to enable him to replace the Methodist School and house at Salem which were destroyed by fire.⁴

A printed report of 1826 indicates that there were 12 Wesleyan schools in various parts of the island and a day school schedule dated 1840 lists: Plymouth with 143 boys and girls, Salem with 50 boys and girls, Broderick's with 56 boys and girls 56, Carty's with 59

¹ Farquhar, David U., 1999, *Missions and Society in the Leeward Islands*, p.104

² *ibid*

³ Farquhar, p. 105,109

⁴ Lawrence, George, E., *Chronology of Montserrat and Its Methodism*,(undated manuscript) p113

boys and girls, Bethel with 68 Boys and girls, Tar River (long Ground) with 42 Boys and girls, and Cavalla Hill with 72 boys and girls.

Interesting to note that, owing to the concentration of Methodist educational work in this district of Bethel, the nearby schools at Carty's and Tar River were discontinued as centres of general education while Sunday School work continued at both locations. Methodists did not reopen a day school in this area until 1931 when the Infants School was opened at Long Ground (see below).⁵

Methodist schools, then, had served several different localities, but the discontinuation of institutions at Carty's in the east and Broderick's in the south meant that by 1918-19, there remained the Bethel Wesleyan School with an enrolment of 326, Cavalla Hill Wesleyan with 290, Wesley School, Plymouth with 224 and Salem and Long Ground.

These five continued until the Methodist Church relinquished responsibility for the management of its schools and handed them over to the government on January 1, 1945.

From the outset, substantial financial commitments towards provisions for education, whether educational supplies, training and remuneration of teachers, or building of schools was rare. This continued into the twentieth century when government partnered with the churches in the administration and funding of schools. Fergus observes that while under the 1925 Education Act the Government of the Leeward Islands contributed the bulk of funds for education (779£ 10s. 4p. compared with school boards' voluntary contributions of 113£ 6s. 9 p.), this sum was grossly inadequate to meet the existing needs.⁶ Building of accommodation for schools often demanded great stewardship and tremendous sacrifice on the part of the families of would be beneficiaries, a practice which would, in the long run, serve the cause of societal transformation, through harnessing and encouraging sociopolitical capacities of those involved.

A case in point was the 1931 decision of Methodists acting on behalf of the younger children of Long Ground who had to walk three miles to school. This hardship was brought on by the church's internal decision to discontinue general education in a geographical area of its predominance, while retaining Sunday school for religious instruction to ensure its sustained numerical growth. In consultation with the Federal Inspector of Schools, it was agreed that a building would be erected at Long Ground in the south east for day schooling. The bulk of finances, wood, labour and supervision for this venture were provided by locals. The monetary cost was 221£14s 5p of which 184£ 3s. 7p. was raised locally. At the time of opening there was a debt of 37£ remaining.⁷

⁵ Lawrence, George, E, 1967, *Montserrat and Its Methodism*. Volume 3, p.52-56

⁶ Fergus, Howard A., 2004, *Montserrat: History of a Caribbean Colony*, p.139

⁷ Lawrence, *Montserrat*, 57,58

Similarly, when the need had arisen in the previous century to replace the dual purpose wooden house serving as a school-chapel at Cavalla Hill in the north west, the parliamentary grant received was a mere 80£ of the total project cost of 170£.⁸

The establishment of a school at Long Ground was also necessitated by the response of the population to the Methodist Church's offer of elementary education. The largest Methodist school was located at Bethel on the eastern side of the island. At the start of 1931 the Bethel School had 273 scholars on its roll, but the ground area of the building was limited to 180 square feet, with the result that this structure did not meet the space requirements stipulated by the Montserrat Education Code. According to this Code Bethel School could accommodate only 225 scholars. It was overcrowded by 48 scholars. This crisis precipitated the development of Long Ground Methodist School to accommodate juniors only. However, by the time of its registration on May 22, there were already 63 scholars on roll.

Social factors, however, challenged the sustained enrolment in schools generally. Notwithstanding the presence of Wesleyan missionaries, the manner in which slavery operated precluded attendance by many potential students. Itinerancy of these missionaries may have been a further deterrent to the early extension of general education projects. Irregular attendances were a recurring problem. The ascendancy of the Sunday School helped to some extent, but comparison of enrolments for day schools and Sunday schools of the same period indicate that the greater emphasis was on attendance at the former. In 1863, for example, the Montserrat Circuit recorded a total Sunday school membership of 224, while the number of day school scholars was 168.⁹

The Sunday Schools, by design, facilitated indoctrination in Methodist faith matters, and also prepared attendees for such leadership roles as exhorters and Sunday school assistants (teaching). Since a significant percentage of day scholars also attended Sunday school, Methodist students were thereby exposed indirectly to training in public speaking. While only a few became preachers, the public speaking skills acquired served well in the wider community. It should not be surprising that local preachers and other Methodist stalwarts such as M.S. Osborne and Robert W. Griffith were among the first local politicians and architects of the trade union movement in Montserrat. Writing about Quamina Williams, dubbed 'Father of Bethel Methodism' Fergus writes

Quamina Williams leadership skills and power with men were in demand in the secular world. He was made manager and overseer of several estates across the island...he was as trustworthy as he was intelligent.. People recognizing his Solomonic wisdom and his moral authority, went to him to get their disputes settled and exaggeration or not, he was perceived as being more effective than the law enforcement authorities.¹⁰

⁸ Farquhar, p. 161

⁹ Lawrence, Chronology, p. 120

¹⁰ Fergus, Howard, A., 1996, Gallery Montserrat, p.80

Attendance at Sunday school notwithstanding, scholars received a fair share of religious instruction in Wesleyan Methodist schools as the Minister attached to the school was chaplain and tutor for Religious Education. In this era when the home/school/ church interface was undeniably strong, Methodist schools had singular opportunity for enhancing moral development of those in their charge.

Missionary journal notes often indicate flaws in their acceptance of African slaves and their descendants as human equals. Notwithstanding this reality, as I mentioned previously, their efforts at propagating the Wesleyan interpretation of holiness was bound to enhance the personal development of those for whom they assumed responsibility, since social expression was integral to the Wesleyan insistence on scriptural holiness.

The emphasis on moral and spiritual formation was not without limitations. Formal and informal education was restrictive in terms of the exposure offered through reading. Moral value dictated the selection of literature, and not much latitude was allowed. In his letter of December 1938, John Cadman, a missionary referred to the reading of novels as "excessive" and judged that these were books which domestic servants "peruse to their own hurt."¹¹ However, on social issues that were judged to be morally and spiritually enlightening, much reading was encouraged. Thomas O'Garra, Cavalla Hill schooled Methodist and contemporary of Cadman has been described as a 'model Christian and philosopher' who lived 'a productive and rewarding life.' He treasured his library of six books which included *Death Struggle of Slavery*.¹²

On this matter concerning the content and scope of reading allowed and encouraged, relevant curriculum for schools remains a significant issue. Montserratian historian Howard A. Fergus accuses Rev. George E. Lawrence of introducing "an unwarranted dichotomy between practical and 'ordinary' subjects into curriculum dialogue". His assessment comes in the context of debate over curriculum matters where Lawrence judged the Montserrat Company's efforts at technical education at its Olveston School to have missed its target since, according to him "it may have been found that ordinary subjects were bound to come first".¹³

A more plausible explanation was that this Wesleyan missionary was careful to sponsor a more holistic approach to education. His view was that practical and technical subjects should not be offered at the expense of "the three Rs" (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) but that the curriculum should be fundamentally intellectually stimulating . There was that prevailing belief in the pre- and post- emancipation periods that slaves/ freed slaves and their descendants did not have the intellectual capacity for "the three Rs", a notion dispelled only through brilliant academic performances of those who

¹¹ Farquhar, p.112

¹² Fergus, Gallery, p. 77,78

¹³ Fergus, History, p.141

benefited from education that tapped their intellectual capacities and fostered holistic development.

In contrast to a later development where more academically inclined students were discouraged from accessing technical vocational subjects, the older schools made for more rounded individuals through the broad scope of the curriculum for elementary education, given what was affordable at the time. By 1925, the school curriculum included Hygiene, Elementary Science, Geography, History and technical subjects such as Needlework which was compulsory for girls and Carpentry and Agriculture for boys.

Lawrence makes reference to a Trinity Institute at Plymouth, programming of which was affected by an earthquake in 1929. It is likely that this represented the introduction of formalised technical vocational education by the Methodists.¹⁴

During this period, insufficient funding by authorities was one, but not the only reason for the absence of a more sophisticated, comprehensive and sustained programme of industrial education. By 1928, elementary schools had become all age establishments catering to children up to between fifteen and sixteen years of age, and should have been more intentional in developing a comprehensive approach to education. Under financing and insufficient teacher training notwithstanding, parent and teacher attitudes towards the delivery of vocational training left much to be desired. In 1936, the Teachers' Association had raised strong objections to a recommendation that its members be given an intensive course in Agriculture.¹⁵ Their lack of enthusiasm for training in skills needed to foster the economic advancement of the country as a whole was typical of the non-white population. This stance was, however, both explainable and understandable in view of the cultural memory of slavery and the persistence of the plantation economy. The concept of education that obtained was anticipation of intellectual excellence that would serve as a passport to elevate the successful above the menace of field work and industrial labour of any sort. Hence a number of factors interplayed in the failure to establish a system of education truly relevant to the needs of the society.

The debate over curriculum content carries into the present with the Montserrat Sustainable Development Plan 2010-2020 identifying the revision of school curricula as vitally urgent actions to be undertaken. That noted, credit must be given to the pioneer educators whose approach catered to the rounded formation of students whose general deportment, attention to personal care, respect for self and authority, and community involvement were taken account of. A system that enabled children to learn song, speech and drama with a view to exposure of their talents in church must have helped to inspire a sense of self-worth more than it hindered. The craft and trade classes which have been judged as crude might have been more helpful to the development of entrepreneurial skills, a current obvious lack of which has been singled out as gravely problematic for Montserrat today. The so called "crude" offerings necessarily concentrated on the use of inexpensive readily available local vegetable materials which

¹⁴ Lawrence, Chronology, p.135

¹⁵ Fergus. History, p.142

had to be processed for use in classes. As a result, handicraft involved preparation and local phyto-chemical treatment regimes which have since disappeared from school curricula making way for the use of more refined imported materials, thereby reinforcing the "dependency syndrome" often cited as an index of mis-development in the Caribbean.

At the other end of the development spectrum, one notes the central place held by Methodists in their sponsorship of community building initiatives. At the village level, it was Methodists who galvanized others and saw to the establishment of the Salem Community Centre which held its first meeting at the Salem Methodist School on February 24, 1943.

At the island level, Methodists also led. Methodist Missionary Rev. George E. Lawrence spearheaded the development of a newspaper for the local readership. The first issue of *The Observer*, a fortnightly publication was produced in 1944 with its motto "to be the friend of all and enemy of none" and its aim "to uplift the mental, moral, social, physical and spiritual life of the people."¹⁶

At the regional level, Thomas Noel Kirnon, brilliant educator of Cavalla Hill Methodist stock, is listed among those who gave sterling service throughout the Leeward Islands. Fergus writes about his day school teacher, Sunday school teacher and local preacher, 'a staunch Methodist, he was a man of integrity and high moral principles.' He was eulogised by the late Antiguan Prime Minister Bird as 'one who had experienced the wholesome uplifting influence' and a man who had 'a consuming interest in the educational, moral and social well-being of his pupils and students'.¹⁷

On the international stage, among Montserratians who migrated abroad, Methodist educated persons are numbered among those who, on different continents, offered sterling leadership either individually or collectively. Literary figure Ernest Archibald Markham, descendant of a solid line of Methodists and graduate of the Bethel Methodist School, has influenced writings in France, Northern Ireland, Sweden, Germany, Papua New Guinea, England and eventually Montserrat where he began. In the forefront were those who established in 1914, "The Montserrat Social League" which continues today as "The Montserrat Progressive Society of New York." The Society's aims were to unite people from Montserrat; to assist in upholding them socially, morally and intellectually; to promote the general welfare of its members; to care for sick, and those in distress, and to bury its dead.¹⁸

At home, Methodists promoted ecumenicity, seeking to harness the collective skills of Montserrat, and they were willing to take second place where the cause was served. The inaugural meeting of the Salvation Army was held in June 1944 at St. Mary's Anglican School in Plymouth. This was visibly supported by Hon. M.S. Osborne, Circuit

¹⁶ Lawrence, Chronology, p.144, 145

¹⁷ Fergus, Gallery, p.50,51

¹⁸ Lawrence, Chronology, p.132

Steward. While the initial meeting was a spirited one, the movement did not progress in Montserrat.¹⁹

Through the establishment of cooperative efforts such as the Wesley Credit Union, Methodism promoted financial responsibility and self-reliance. With its proliferation of meetings, and the emphasis on lay leadership, opportunity arose for leaders to hone in on skills for the transformation of society. This, indeed, was how the Methodist movement spread from shore to shore in the Caribbean, to Montserrat under the leadership of Kitty Dorsette, a freed slave, and to Aruba from Montserrat by Tom Markham who went in search of work in the oilfields.

The debate in education on Montserrat today revolves around relevance. The current struggle is one to create a curriculum that prepares young Montserratians to face global realities and simultaneously enhances the social and economic development of the island. The 1945 wholesale transfer of education to the purview of government seems to be backfiring. At least that is the expressed view of many. Current political realities within the church do not, however, indicate wide support for sponsorship of general education for the majority. On the other hand, the Methodist circuit is placed to supplement school programmes and address the gaps created by imbalance in curriculum offerings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Farquhar, David, 1999, *Missions and Society in the Leeward Islands, 1810-1850: an Ecclesiastical and Social Analysis*, Mt. Prospect Press, Boston

Fergus, Howard A., 2004, *Montserrat: History of a Caribbean Colony. Second Edition*, Macmillan, London

1996, *Gallery Montserrat: Some Prominent People in Our History*, Canoe Press, Kingston

Lawrence, George, E, *Chronology of Montserrat and Its Methodism, Volume II*.
Undated manuscript

1967, *Montserrat and Its Methodism*, Bristol

¹⁹ Lawrence, Chronology, p.146