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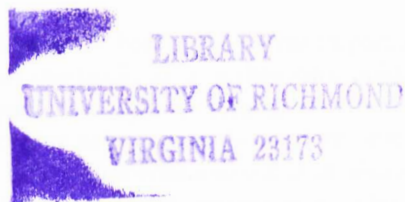
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Teaching Britain

*Elementary Teachers and the State
of the Everyday, 1846–1906*

CHRISTOPHER BISCHOF

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Introduction

The illegitimate son of a servant from the Scottish Highlands, William Campbell effected his own upward social mobility by becoming a teacher. The state paid for his apprenticeship as a pupil teacher in the small village of Durness and then his teacher training programme in bustling Edinburgh. After his training and an initial job in the village of Nethybridge, he settled into a position as an elementary teacher in the scattered crofting community of Rogart in Sutherland in 1898. Though he followed Whitehall policymakers' directives and taught quite a bit of English history and literature during school hours, he went to great lengths to acquire Gaelic dictionaries, grammars, and works of literature so that he could teach the language and literary culture to children and adults alike in the evenings. This was no defiant gesture of nascent Scottish cultural nationalism. Campbell was determined to serve the distant British state *and* the community of Rogart. The two went hand in hand for him. Tireless, he also gathered funding from local, Scottish, and English patrons to open a soup kitchen that fed hungry pupils and a scholarship programme that helped send bright girls and boys who otherwise could not afford it to secondary school and even university.

After a few years on the job, Campbell began to tap the network of former pupils and neighbours who had gone abroad to send him curiosities for the local museum, which he established in the schoolhouse. On 28 May 1900, he acquired from William Murray, a Rogarian just returned from work as a carpenter in South Africa, '2 assegaïs, one a Wanganui—a very fierce tribe—the other an Argoni assegaï; [also] some photos, etc.' He put these and other artefacts on display at the schoolhouse, available for viewing by anyone. Campbell also hosted foreign visitors who passed through the area in the schoolhouse. Curious about life in Russia, Campbell questioned a Jewish commercial traveller originally from the Russian Pale for hours about his everyday life growing up. He recorded in great detail everything from this man's opinion on the corruption of the conscription system to typical foods eaten by working families ('Tea without bread, eggs, bread, butter, etc. Herrings taken raw; skinned, vinegar put on, cut in small pieces, taken with onions...'). Teachers were always on the lookout for ways to bring the world to life for their pupils, so perhaps these details flavoured the dry overview of foreign countries often found in geography textbooks. As a dedicated autodidact who studied four foreign languages in his spare time, Campbell pressed his visitor to help him with his Russian pronunciation.¹

¹ Highland Council Archive (HCA): D423/2/1, 'Diary of a Highland School Master' 1–23, 36–41.

This is a story of individual initiative and curiosity, but it also illustrates the flexibility of the system that allowed it. Campbell's passionate commitment to his work, neighbours, and nation enabled him to translate distant policymakers and cultures to a Scottish community. At the same time, he translated a Scottish community to policymakers and philanthropists in Whitehall and Edinburgh through the stories he told in his appeals for charity and in his log book, the official record he kept of his work. Campbell and other teachers like him were, after postal workers, the most numerous and ubiquitous agents of the Victorian state. Certainly they had the most sustained contact with communities. However, teachers had a very different relationship to both state and society than most other agents of the state. From the perspective of the communities they served, teachers humanized the state. Collectively, teachers also taught the state to see British society in new ways.

Campbell was one of more than one hundred thousand teachers who worked in neighbourhoods across Britain during the years between 1846 and 1906.² Given the size and heterogeneity of the profession, he was not a typical teacher because there was no such thing as a typical teacher. Indeed, one of the most striking features about Victorian teachers was the incredible diversity of opinions and practices that existed on the ground, even on issues where policymakers or teachers' own union sought to impose conformity. Nevertheless, some of the ways in which Campbell sought to know and engage with his community and the wider world were shared by his peers across Britain.

Teaching Britain tells the story of how elementary teachers served, but also reshaped the state and society in Victorian Britain through their everyday work. Their insatiable curiosity about the world made them into indefatigable readers and innovative pedagogues. It also propelled them out of the classroom and into the nation's streets and homes, British colonies, and other countries. A deep commitment to sharing what they learned from these investigations led them to become prolific storytellers who chronicled the peoples and cultures they encountered, both literally and through their reading. Teachers humanized poor, working-class, and colonial and foreign subjects in the eyes of the state even as they embodied a responsive, humane side of the state for the communities in which they worked by adapting or supplementing state policies to meet local needs and desires. This work beyond the classroom made teachers instrumental in shaping many of the features that defined modern Britain, from its welfare system to its delicate balancing of

² Estimating the total number of men and women who taught in elementary schools during this time period is difficult owing to several factors, especially the imprecise information about how many teachers left the profession each year, as well as the question of who counts as a teacher. By 1899, the number of adult teaching staff working in English and Welsh schools included 62,085 certificated teachers, 30,233 uncertificated assistant teachers, and 16,717 'Article 68'ers'. This was up from 30,896 certificated teachers and 10,530 uncertificated assistant teachers in 1879–80 and 12,467 certificated teachers and 1,262 uncertificated assistant teachers in 1870. By 1899 in Scotland, there were 3,535 certificated head teachers, 6,841 certificated assistant teachers, and 2,371 uncertificated assistant teachers. See Asher Tropp, *The School Teachers: The Growth of the Teaching Profession in England and Wales from 1800 to the Present Day* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 114–18; Robert Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People, 1750–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 177.

tradition and innovation, local and central state power to a sense of imperial citizenship that cut across social ranks.

Elementary teachers sought to do good for others even as they made good themselves. In becoming teachers, working-class boys and girls took advantage of what was arguably the first institutionalized, state-sponsored opportunity for social mobility available on a large scale. Lower-middle-class boys and girls saved themselves from the prospect of downward mobility or dreary, stifling positions as clerks, shop assistants, or governesses. As teachers, they engaged with the world in ways which had been out of reach for most of their parents, such as travelling to the far corners of Britain and the wider world on their summer holidays. Teachers also sought to change the lives of others. They took seriously their responsibility to give their pupils a thorough education, coordinated philanthropic efforts, and investigated and then narrated the lives of their pupils outside the classroom. Teachers embodied the dynamism on the fringes of the liberal state, where policies met reality. They forged a newly democratic expertise which privileged sustained, intimate ways of knowing and imagined new roles for the state, modes of class relations, ideals of masculinity and femininity, and ways of thinking about the empire. This expertise was self-serving, but also in the service of the state and local communities.