PATRIC CUMIN, 1823-1890.

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FROM its creation in 1839 to its transformation in 1899, the Education Department had five secretaries. The first—Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth (1839-1849) has received his due both from his contemporaries and ours. The second and third, Lingen (1849-1869) and Sandford (1870-1884) both received peerages and further promotion. The last—Kekewich (1849-1902), a knighthood and the pleasure of reviewing his predecessor's work and his own in print.

That predecessor—the fourth secretary, Patric Cumin (1884-1890), received no title. He never enjoyed retirement, much less the leisure to write. He died in harness, and his name, unrelieved even by a dispassionate judgement in the Dictionary of National Biography, has remained as a symbol of all that was restrictive and therefore bad in the Education Department of the eighteen-eighties.

This prejudiced view originated with G. A. Christian and was adopted by Prof. Frank Smith and Prof. T. Raymond. It gives the impression that Cumin was a typical bureaucrat—and was "not disposed to alter things that were". This is by no means the case. Let us examine the man's career in perspective and evaluate his real contribution to the English Educational System.

His origins were conventional. He trod the same academic path as Sandford, his predecessor in office. Son of a Glasgow professor, he passed through Shrewsbury, Glasgow University, and Balliol College, Oxford, where he was a Snell exhibitioner in 1841, B.A. in 1845 and M.A. in 1850. Four years later he published a manual of civil law—a commentary and translation
of the works of Justinian which reached a second edition in twelve months. In 1855 he was called to the bar at the Inner Temple.

In 1859 he was appointed by the Newcastle Commission to make an inquiry into English Charities which were applied to or applicable to education, with particular reference to the south-west of England. It was to be a favourite Radical theme—partly because it meant an attack on privilege, and partly because it would lessen the strain on the rates. One of Cumin's questions to a Devonport Dockyard apprentice asking for a definition of an "endowed school" called forth from Prof. Adamson the acid comment that "it furnished a rough test of Mr. Cumin's own intelligence". His report on "The Popular Education of the Bristol and Plymouth Districts" was published in 1861. His estimate of the general condition of English education at that time is that one-eighth of the population was at school, and of those one-quarter were efficiently educated. The mass of schools were "mere nurseries". A year later he began to edit The London Review. In 1867 he became secretary to the Scotch Education Commission with whom he obtained an insight into the working of an educational system far in advance of English efforts being made at that time to formulate one.

In 1868 came his first great stroke of good fortune. W. E. Forster, borne in on the tide of a Liberal majority to the Vice-Presidency of the Council, was charged with the duty of bringing in a Bill to establish an English "system". He selected Cumin as his private secretary. The appointment raised a storm of protest, violating as it did the laws of seniority, and a memorial deprecating it was circulated. To our eyes, it bears a strange resemblance to a much later appointment of Robert Morant to a more important post. As private secretary, Cumin had to cope with the endless deputations from the National Educational League and the National Educational Union, and Forster must have kept him very busy in the ferment preceding and during the passing of the Education Bill in 1870.

1 English Education, p. 218.
After the Bill became law, Cumin received his reward in being appointed assistant secretary to the Education Department. He was charged with dealing with legal questions arising from the Act. He held the post of assistant secretary from 16th August, 1870, to 15th May, 1884. During that time he saw the Board School system take root and grow. As a knowledgeable and responsible contemporary said of him, "His support of Board Schools and School Boards was uncompromising", and he "often strained the law in their favour".

We must consider that the 1870 Act itself was imperfectly understood by the politicians much less by the districts charged with the permissive obligation to erect School Boards, and that even in 1876 there was a strong party in the country against the principle of School Boards at all.

He was very antipathetic towards the "private venture" schools, kept for the purpose of evading the half-time clauses of the Factory Acts. His remarks before the Commission set up in response to A. J. Mundella's demand in 1874, to inquire into the administration of the Factory Acts, provided ammunition for Radical attacks on government policy.

"One inconvenience which has arisen is the most inconvenient of all things, a conflict between the factory inspector and our inspector. The factory inspector sometimes insists that a school is efficient and we say it is not. Then we order a School Board on the ground of the deficiency, and after the School Board is up, the children continue to go to what we call an inefficient school, but what the inspector of factories calls an efficient school. Then the ratepayers are compelled to build a school and they say, 'It is very hard we are made to build a school because you say the school is inefficient, and the factory inspector says it is efficient, so our school is no use'."  

When asked whether he favoured the extension of the Factory Acts to all factories he replied, "Yes—but whenever we ask about it, we are told that nothing but the grossest inefficiency can authorise a factory inspector to declare a school inefficient."

1 Kekewich, op. cit.  
2 Disraeli and Clause 25.  
3 Hansard, 19th June, 1876.  
It was evidence of this character which not only supplied material for Radical attacks, but ensured the success of their point of view in the Commission's report, which resulted in the 1874 Factory Act.

When the Radical, Mundella, became Vice-President of the Council in 1880 and secured universal, direct compulsory attendance at school by ordering that "It shall be the duty of the local authorities of every school district which has not made byelaws . . . to do so forthwith", the last word was made operative by Cumin. The Bill became law on 26th August, 1880, and two days later circulars signed by Cumin went out to all local authorities who had not submitted byelaws for approval. A short table gives an idea of the success of this brisk administration.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year ended 1st April</th>
<th>No. of Boards</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1879</td>
<td>1,243</td>
<td>12,395,550</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>3,083,609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>1,421</td>
<td>12,605,453</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>3,665,705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>2,051</td>
<td>13,318,492</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>9,393,774</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It probably explains the expression Mr. Russell noticed on his face in 1881.

Cumin worked in 1882 on the small code committee which the Vice-President set up to institute greater flexibility in the awarding of grants. Sandford, the secretary, J. Sykes, one of Cumin's colleagues as an assistant secretary, Matthew Arnold, Joshua Fitch, Warburton, and Sharpe, with other members, and Mundella, Vice-President of the Council, as chairman. It was the Vice-President's preference for the conference method he had found so successful in industry twenty-two years before which gave Christian his jaundiced view, since Mundella retained the "code committee" as a consultative body. Being

appreciative, Mundella often referred to the "ability and zeal" of the permanent officials and the assistance they rendered in getting out the code.¹

The numerous reforms and activity of Mundella's vice-presidency led to Sandford leaving the Education Department in 1884, and Mundella selected Cumin to fill his place, not without difficulty. The selection of a secretary was a matter for the Lord-President of the Council (Lord Carlingford) who had intended to appoint a well known and able inspector to the vacancy. When Mundella heard that such an appointment was contemplated, he insisted that Cumin should be chosen, and in the end was said to have written his resignation and threatened to send it in to Gladstone. Then the Lord-President gave way and Cumin was chosen.²

From 15th May, 1884, till his death in 1890 Cumin was Secretary of the Education Department. Twice promoted by Radical vice-presidents, he found himself secretary a year later to a conservative vice-president who had not the enthusiasm of Forster or Mundella. Cumin's liberalism and anti-denominationalism were no secret in the Department.

In these last six years there were two spheres in which his influence was most felt. The first was in the administrative organisation of the inspectorate, the second, his outspoken and liberal views before the Cross Commission, 1886-1887. He put an end to the habits of certain chief inspectors hibernating at the Athenæum, miles from the scenes of their districts and complaisant as to the system of examination, since they never experienced them but left them to their assistants. Indeed, the tightening up of the inspectorate may have led to a more positive expression of their views on the "code committee". The county was divided up into divisions, each with a chief inspector in charge. Instead of each inspector sending in a report upon his district, the chief inspectors of five out of the ten divisions drew up annual reports with the assistance of the suffragans in their divisions. These gave a more complete account of the state of education throughout the country, and

¹ Hansard, 8th August, 1881. ² Kekewich, op. cit., p. 27.
at the same time gave a better basis for any inferences which might be shown as to its progress.¹

His evidence before the Cross Commission shows him alive and well abreast of contemporary opinions. He put forward the suggestion that the local colleges founded in the previous five years could be used as day training colleges, available to both sexes, admitting pupils after eighteen, with practical schools and lectures on method, and proposed how their expenses could be met and grants awarded.² His scheme would, he claimed, reduce the number of pupil teachers, replacing them by day-training college students, attract a higher class to the profession besides allowing many poorer students to go to college. He argued that it would raise the standard of the teaching profession.

He was by no means uncritical of payment by results, considering that system had improved. He complained that Matthew Arnold³ had “ignored the whole principle of the administration of the code”. It was not in 1886 what it had been under Lingen, when it was “too severe”. “The grant is not appraised on so many subjects, it is assessed on the average attendance and the school generally.”⁴

But he saw and appreciated the coming developments. He favoured block grants to county boards,⁵ and expressed his warm approval of the proposal to set up county authorities for educational purposes. He saw that they would get rid of the School Board elections and control both denominational and undenominational school alike. The grant of “whisky-money” in the year of his death did not go as far as he proposed.

He died in harness. A storm of controversies in which he had precipitated the Department “reached their limit at the time of his death”.⁶ His successor was appointed on the express understanding he would be more compromising than Cumin, whose golden rule had been never to admit he was

² Cross Commission, Q. 59599-59610, Q. 59718-59723.
wrong. Perhaps his very efficiency and precise legal mind (he told the Cross Commission that only a legal training was suitable for a secretary of the Education Department), coupled with his dour Scotch fads, made him unpopular amongst the very people he was doing his best to benefit.