

Early Education

Prior to 1827 a small church existed in Bird Island Cove which was shared by the Anglicans and the ever-increasing Wesleyan congregation. In that year the construction of the second Anglican Church was begun (The Evening Telegram, February 16, 1985.):

St. Mary's Anglican Church, Elliston, celebrated its 112th anniversary Sept. 18, 1984. The church is a part of the Bonavista parish which was first established in 1723 when Rev. Henry Jones from England was appointed to serve in Bonavista. St. Mary's is the second of two to be built on the site. The first church was consecrated by Bishop John Inglis of Nova Scotia in 1827. One of the oldest of its kind in the province, St. Mary's seats about 100 and serves the congregations of Elliston and Maberly.

From the earliest days of settlement of Bird Island Cove until the establishment of the first day school in 1839, and periodically thereafter until 1853 when the day school was permanently established, the responsibility for education rested primarily with the Wesleyan and Church of England clergy and a small number of educated members of the congregations. They performed their academic duties on the Sabbath and, unlike the Sunday Schools that evolved later, taught reading and writing as well as the Scriptures. Rev. William Wilson described the Sunday schools conducted by the Methodists Missionaries throughout Newfoundland in 1816 (Newfoundland and Its Missionaries, Rev. William Wilson, MUN CNS, BX 8356 N4W5):

In those days there was little education in Newfoundland. Very many large communities were without any kind of school; so that only a few persons could read, less were able to write, to see a young married couple sign the register was no ordinary event. To meet this want as much as possible, our brethren established Sabbath schools in every circuit; but the lack of persons competent to teach rendered it necessary for preachers and their families to take the principal part in instructing the children, from the enunciation of the letters of the alphabet to that of reading the Scriptures of truth. There were no Wesleyan Catechisms then in existence; so that instruction in gospel doctrines and Bible history had all to be given verbally, which was a great additional labour for the preachers. But they were compensated in the readiness which the children showed in acquiring the art of reading, and the knowledge of those subjects to which their attention was directed. Hundreds of persons in Newfoundland obtained their knowledge in our Sabbath schools; and the religious impression made upon their minds, while in those schools, were never forgotten; but in many instances, in after life, were the means of their conversion.

As every person, both male and female, was engaged in the fishery, either in catching or curing the fish, we could have no meetings on week days during the summer, but all our meetings were crowded together on the Lord's day. Thus in most of our harbours at six o'clock in the morning, a prayer meeting would be held in the chapel; at seven, a class meeting; at nine, the Sabbath school; at eleven, preaching; at two, the Sabbath school again; at three, preaching; after preaching, a female class; and at half past six either preaching or prayer meeting. At all these meetings the missionary was expected to be present; so that to him the Sabbath was indeed a day of toil. But God gave the missionaries strength for their day, and blessed them in their work...

Archdeacon George Coster, in a letter written at Bonavista, July 21th, 1827, testifies to the effectiveness of the Sunday Schools conducted by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, an Anglican institution which served Newfoundland from 1722 until about 1843 (Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, ACC NR, 370 PAMP N):

...Some how or other we must have done our part in the work of education, else, how, I would ask, were the young people in many parts of this country brought to that degree of knowledge and civilization, which it is undeniable they had attained?

I allow, indeed, that it was chiefly by means of Sunday schools, that we had been serviceable to the children of the poor. Such schools were numerous in our missions; and though the system of instruction pursued in most of them, was very indifferent, and the teacher not so capable as we could have wished; great good was done by them. In some cases I have been surprised to see so much effected with so little means. In them, by Sunday instruction alone, many are the children who have learned to read and to pray, besides being regularly catechized, and brought to public worship; of which, but for the teachers of these schools, they would have known nothing...

Readers, whose primary function was to conduct the affairs of the church in the absence of qualified clergy, were appointed to many small congregations. They also taught school if the residents could provide the necessary school house and materials. Such a reader was appointed to Bird Island Cove by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel as early as 1825. The following extract is from a letter by Rev. George Coster, Bonavista, dated July 19, 1826 (Anglican Church of Canada, General Synod Archives, Society for the Propagation of the Bible in Foreign Parts, PANL, MF 78-14 reel 44 (A-192.):

Mr. Martin's appointment as reader at Bird Island Cove has ceased to be of force by his having left the neighbourhood after having done the duty assigned him with great regularity for half a year. I presume the Society will not object to paying his salary for the time he served and shall therefore take upon myself to pay him the half of fifteen pounds and draw on the treasurer thereafter to that amount...

*Rev. James Robertson, Anglican missionary, wrote (The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, pp. 138-140 of the report for the year 1829-1830, MUN CNS, MF, 567, reel 12.):
December 14, 1829.*

A reader has lately been stationed here [Bird Island Cove] by the Society: he teaches Sunday-school, and intends to open a daily one as soon as the people can procure him a school-house....Since my last visit, they have likewise procured a school-house, in which the reader can forthwith commence his daily labours.

With the possible exception of the school conducted by Mark Chard in his home, and perhaps the occasional reader whose stay in Bird Island Cove was of brief duration, the only formal education available was provided by the Sunday Schools. The poverty of the people, and thus the inability of the churches to collect funds for books and basic supplies, often contributed to the lack of success of the school (Methodist Church records, United Church Archives, Elizabeth Avenue, St. John's, NF.):

...Bird Island Cove- At the close of our school the last fall the number of our children was 36. It has not yet re-opened for the present season for the want of books. The people in this circuit are too poor to purchase books for their children. Could the committee furnish a sufficient number of spelling books and Catechisms for the use of our school, they would be productive of much good and prove a powerful auxiliary in helping in the work of God in the circuit.

This Sunday School was administered by the Methodist Missionary Society. It was primitive, ill equipped, and lacked even the speller and catechism- the basic texts. The society, however, worked diligently to overcome these inadequacies (Newfoundland and Its Missionaries, Rev. William Wilson, MUN CNS, BX 8356 N4W5):

In the year 1824, Newfoundland received its first importation of Conference Catechisms. The whole series of these invaluable compilations of Scripture truth were from the pen of the noble and learned Richard Watson, who, at the time of writing them, was one of our missionary secretaries.

Some time in the year 1822, Mr. Watson, under the direction of conference, compiled two Catechisms on Scripture doctrine and history; the first for very young children, the second for children who were able to read the Bible...In the spring of 1823, Mr. Watson published a third Catechism, which completed the series... These Catechisms have been sent forth by tens of thousands...By these Catechisms, the labor of our Sabbath school teachers have been considerable lightened...

In 1836 there were seventy-eight boys and eighty-three girls under the age of fourteen living in Bird Island Cove. No day school was in existence (Censuses of Newfoundland, MUN CNS, HA 747 N4.).

In 1838 the Methodist Sunday School recorded thirty-eight boys, thirty-six girls, one superintendent and four male teachers (Methodist Missionary Society, PANL, microfilm B/5/1, reel 22.).

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Information Provided by Mr. Doug Cole