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30 maart 2017 om 21:54

Educating the Irish: The Case of the Mathematician and Engineer John Gregory (1783-1880)

Abstract :

ABSTRACT: In 1831, the British government established the system of so-called National Schools for the whole of the territory of Ireland. This was a system of state-funded, non-denominational primary schools overseen by a body called the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland. A few years later, a structure for the training of teachers at the National Schools was put in place as well. For both the pupils at the primary schools level and the teachers in training, a National Curriculum in the form of the series of prescribed textbooks was developed. Within a couple of years, the Commissioners produced a sequence of textbooks covering pretty much all (non-religious) subjects on the whole range below college level. All books were published anonymously and as cheaply as possible, with the authors forfeiting any rights to royalties. In mathematics, beyond an introductory arithmetic text and an informal geometry text in the form of a translation of the first two parts of Clairaut's *Éléments de géométrie*, the National Curriculum included an advanced arithmetic text and a text on mensuration (= the elementary study of the area and volume of various geometrical figures). Various secondary sources indicate that the author of these two texts was a John Gregory (1783-1880). Leaving aside the question whether either book was at the appropriate level for the intended audiences, both are fairly sound pedagogically and remarkably systematic. Other than that Gregory was also the author of a standard work on civil engineering, not much can be found about him in the standard sources. In the 1850s, however, we find him in Milwaukee (USA), where he published a two-volume work on the economical resources of Wisconsin. At it turns out, the second edition of this study is interspersed with extensive autobiographical passages about Gregory's life in Ireland. In addition, a collection of about thirty letters, fliers, and pamphlets dating from his time in

Ireland ended up with the Milwaukee County Historical Society. Finally, the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison holds a 3-page autobiographical sketch by Gregory. Taken together with his books and what little we can find from the standard sources, this material allows us to reconstruct the outlines of John Gregory's life as an educator on the margins in Ireland. For this talk, I intend to present a succinct biography of John Gregory, with a focus on his involvement in the creation of the mathematical textbooks that were part of the National Curriculum, the existing sources that he used, his ideas about pedagogy, and their alignment with the overall philosophy behind the National Schools system. **RELEVANCE:** This talk will shed light on the machinations behind the actual implementation of the national curriculum in Ireland and the interactions at the time between those at the center of the Dublin academic and educational scene and those working in the margins, all as illustrated by the subject of mathematics. **PRIMARY SOURCES:** [John Gregory], *A Treatise on Arithmetic in Theory and Practice for the Use of the Irish National Schools* (Dublin, 1834) [John Gregory], *A Treatise on Practical geometry, Mensuration, Conic Sections, Gauging, and Land-surveying, with an Essay on the Specific Gravity of Bodies (...)* for the Use of the Irish National Schools (Dublin, 1834) John Gregory, *A Course of Civil Engineering, Comprising Plane Trigonometry, Surveying, and*

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Levelling (...) (Dublin, 1842-3) John Gregory, *A New and Vastly Improved Edition of the Industrial Resources of Wisconsin Containing Numerous New Subjects, Not in the First Edition (...)* (2 vols) (Milwaukee, 1870-3) **SECONDARY SOURCES:** John Logan, "The National Curriculum." In: James Murphy (ed.), *The Oxford History of the Irish Book, Volume IV: The Irish Book in English, 1800-1891*, pp. 499-517 (OUP, 2011) Walsh, Tom "The National System of Education." In: Brendan Walsh (ed.), *Essays in the History of Irish Education: Past, Present, and Future Perspectives* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), pp.7-43. **ARCHIVAL SOURCES:** Milwaukee County Historical Society, John Goadby Gregory Papers (1820s-1967) (MS-0455) Wisconsin Historical Society at Madison, John Gregory. *Autobiographical Sketch* (SC 1841 MAD 4/14SC 1841)