

The Hedge Schools

There must be something about prohibitions that make citizens defy even the strongest government. In America, prohibition of alcoholic beverages led to a thriving industry in "bootleg" whiskey; in Ireland, prohibition of Roman Catholic education led to a thriving industry in "bootleg" schools, Ireland's Hedge Schools.

The Hedge Schools emerged out of the harshness of the infamous Penal Laws, passed between 1702 and 1719. One of the first of the Penal Laws specified that "no person of the popish religion shall publicly or in private houses teach school, or instruct youth in learning within this realm..." One commentator on this Penal Law said that "It was not merely the persecution of a religion, it was an attempt to degrade and demoralize a whole nation." A law so unjust as this pleaded to be defied and the Irish of the 18th century were equal to the challenge.

It was not that there were no schools in Ireland open to Roman Catholic children that led to the Hedge Schools. The English government sponsored schools but the majority of the Catholic population refused to use them. The government schools were clearly intended to proselytize and to Anglicize Ireland. As late as 1825, the Protestant hierarchy petitioned the King, saying "amongst the ways to convert and civilise the Deluded People, the most necessary have always been thought to be that a sufficient number of English Protestant Schools be erected, wherein the Children of the Irish Natives should be instructed in the English Tongue and in the Fundamental Principles of the True Religion."

The Irish who could afford the Hedgemaster's fee sent their children to Hedge Schools where Gaelic brehons, storytellers and musicians secretly taught Irish history, tradition, and told tales of the Irish children's ancestry. Popular history places these schools under ruined walls or in dry ditches by the roadside. Some lessons, no doubt, were taught in the shadow of a hedge while others were taught in barns. Some schools even had names, such as the Moate Lane School where Edmund Rice, founder of the Irish Christian Brothers, received his education. Some were even more comfortable than the state sponsored Diocesan and Charter schools and held to a higher standard of instruction, including classical training in Ovid and Virgil.

A Commission of Inquiry reported in 1826 that of the 550,000 pupils enrolled in all schools in Ireland, 403,000 were in Hedge Schools. Sadly, too many children had no schooling. Their need motivated two of the great Irish educators. Nano Nagle defied the Penal Laws to open schools for the children of the poor in the mid-1700's and she founded the Order of the Presentation Sisters to continue her work. Inspired by Nano Nagle, Edmund Rice opened schools for the poor to counter the English use of the schools to proselytize and left the Christian Brothers to teach "Paddy Stink and Mickey Mud."

The Penal Laws were gradually repealed, the prohibition on Irish teachers being lifted in 1782. In 1832, State elementary schools acceptable to the Irish Catholic population were instituted, resulting in the waning of the Hedge School system. The Hedge Schools had done what was needed to demonstrate that the Irish would defy laws that were aimed at destroying their culture and they demonstrated the love of the Irish for learning. They also give us many romantic visions of children and Hedgemaster studying Greek and Latin with the sky as their ceiling and the emerald green turf of Ireland as their floor. John O'Hagan's verse gives us the image of the Hedge Schools that the Irish cherish:

*I Still crouching 'neath the sheltering hedge,
Or stretched on mountain fern,
The teacher and his pupils met feloniously to learn.*

(written by John Walsh)

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