The Legacy of Alexander Duff

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Alexander Duff was born at Moulin in the Perthshire Highlands of Scotland on April 25, 1806; his father was a tenant farmer and a fervent Evangelical. He attended Perth grammar school and then proceeded to the University of St. Andrews, where he completed both the general and the divinity courses, and was greatly impressed by the teaching of Thomas Chalmers. He married Anne Scott Drysdale in 1829, shortly before setting out for India. He died on February 12, 1878, at Sidmouth in Devon, England.

Duff is best known for his work in establishing the system of Christian higher education in India, which had a major influence both on missionary policy and on the general development of education in that country. But before analyzing his work in India, one should say a little about his place in the modern Scottish missionary movement.

The Church of Scotland did not begin to undertake overseas missions until the mid-1820s, about a generation after the outburst of missionary activity that marked the start of the modern missionary movement in England. From the outset, however, the Scots laid a particular emphasis on education, as can be seen in the recommendations of Dr. John Inglis, the first convener of the church’s foreign missions committee and more than any other individual the founder of the mission, in 1825–26. This special concern with education was in part a reflection of the Scottish situation at that time—it was much more widely available than in England; partly, also, a result of the insistence of the dominant Moderate party in the church, to which Inglis belonged, that education—Western education—would be a praeparatio evangelica: that Indians who received it would be more receptive to the gospel. Duff was an Evangelical, but he emphatically shared this view, and indeed the successful establishment of the Indian mission was considerably due to the willingness of Moderates and Evangelicals to cooperate in the enterprise.1

On his arrival in Calcutta in 1830, Duff initially devoted all his energies to establishing and building up one school. His concentration of effort is noteworthy: the missionaries of the various English societies who had been working in the area since the 1790s had undertaken vernacular preaching, the preparation of tracts, the translation of the Scriptures, and other activities besides education; and in that department they had not concentrated on one school but had established a large number, which they had found difficult to supervise. Duff’s policy of concentration was one reason for the greater success of his educational effort; but before assessing its significance one should note that he was not, strictly speaking, a pioneer: the English missionaries had already experimented in their schools with the main features of the policy with which he is particularly associated. They had all sought to combine Christian teaching with a broad range of secular subjects; they had recognized the importance of the English language for education, also of training Indian teachers and missionaries; and they were anxious to teach in such a way as to awaken the intellectual potential of their students. Indeed for a few years they had apparently attained a considerable degree of success; but by 1830, for a variety of reasons, the educational work of the English societies had declined, and there was some doubt among their missionaries as to its value. Duff’s role was therefore not that of the pioneer; what he did was to approach the question of education with new energy, skill, and vision, which was rewarded with rapid and unprecedented success; with the result that the importance of education for missions in India was never seriously in doubt subsequently.

The school which Duff founded in 1830 developed eventually into the Scottish Church College of the present day: the college department was established at the end of the first decade, and in due course this was affiliated to Calcutta University. Almost from the start it had a broad curriculum, including in particular a wide range of science subjects; but of even more fundamental importance was the Christian religious teaching. Duff saw Hinduism as the root of India’s problems, but he was hardly less implacably opposed to Western secularism, in which by the time of his arrival a group of young educated Bengalis was becoming interested. Duff’s overriding concern was to present the claims of Christianity as the alternative to both of these, at the intellectual as well as the spiritual level. In his school Christianity was not simply one subject to be taught among others: it was an influence which permeated its whole life and work. The daily routine started with prayer, and parts of the Bible were read and explained every day in the higher classes; Duff regarded science as “the record and interpretation of God’s visible handiworks” and expected that it would help to confirm the truth of Christianity and undermine Hinduism; he adjured a new missionary recruit to the staff to convert “every fact, every event, every truth, every discovery, into a means, and an occasion of illustrating or corroborating sacred verities.”2 One of his pupils, Lal Behari Day, commented that in fact “there was an interpenetration, or rather a chemical union, of the religious element with the whole system of teaching.”3 And it certainly had its effect on the pupils: there were relatively few actual converts, but many came to take a sympathetic interest in Christianity and a critical attitude toward at least the traditional forms of Hinduism. In addition to Christian teaching within his school, Duff gave public lectures on Christianity, which were attended by young men from other institutions.

As a graduate of the University of St. Andrews and pupil of Thomas Chalmers, Duff was better qualified to present this kind of challenge to Hinduism and secularism than the English missionaries, whose educational attainments had been somewhat modest—though this reflected the relatively limited scope in England as compared with Scotland for higher education for those not of upper- or affluent-middle-class parentage; rather than a lack of potential: some of the English Baptists, in particular, had become major oriental scholars despite their lack of formal education. But Duff aimed high socially as well as intellectually: he wrote: “it was our studied endeavor to court the society of those natives belonging to the more wealthy, influential, and learned classes.”4 In terms of caste, Brahmins constituted a quarter to a third of the pupils in his school: this kind of proportion had indeed been found

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in some of the English missionaries’ schools before 1830; but proba­bly only the Serampore Baptists, in the rather different circum­stances of the first quarter of the century, equaled the impact which Duff made on the leadership of Bengali society. His desire to maximize it also explains his disregard of part of the initial in­structions of the Church of Scotland’s missions committee, that he should establish his school outside Calcutta: Duff quickly realized that the city was the focus of the intellectual and social life of Ben­gal, and therefore the appropriate center for his work.

An important reason for the rapid success of Duff’s school was his concern for good educational method: indeed, he adopted a very professional approach to his work. Again, he was not the first missionary to show an awareness of its importance, but the English missionaries in the generation before him had placed what proved to be excessive faith in the monitorial system, which enjoyed a great vogue in early nineteenth-century England, before its limitations became clear. Duff’s model, however, was the Edin­burgh Sessional School, from about 1820 under the direction of the educational reformer John Wood. In contrast to the traditional sys­tem of rote-learning, he stressed the vital importance of engaging the interest and understanding of the pupil in his studies; and Duff applied this principle to his school in Calcutta. Lal Behari Day subsequently recalled that Duff “did communicate knowledge; but before communicating, he brought out of his pupils whatever knowledge they had by a process of close questioning, subjected that knowledge to the crucible of investigation, and thus purified it, and, last of all, added to its stores.” Through this system, “The ideas of the pupils were enlarged; their power of thinking was de­veloped; they were encouraged to observe; they were taught to express their ideas in words; and as learning was made pleasant to them, their affections were drawn towards the acquisition of learning.” Elsewhere Day makes it clear that in the classroom Duff could be not only stimulating but entertaining: in fact it is clear that he was an excellent teacher. His own talents in this re­spect were supplemented by those of his missionary colleagues in the school, notably W. S. Mackay, David Ewart, and Thomas Smith; and he also devoted considerable attention to the training of Indian teachers. And Duff’s concern for a good and well-bal­anced education was not limited to the classroom: he made provi­sion for the boys to take regular exercise and play games, and the annual examination of 1844 was enlivened by a gymastics dis­play. Duff seems to have been the first to introduce this kind of activity into schools in Bengal: one may discern here the influence of David Stow, another Scottish educational reformer whose ideas had impressed Duff.

Duff is, however, remembered above all perhaps for the impe­tus which he gave to English education in India. In his school this involved first teaching the boys English, then using it as the me­dium for an education in contemporary British learning, religious, scientific, and—though more selectively—literary. Duff was a leading protagonist of English because he saw it as by far the most suitable means for his ultimate aim, the Christianizing of India: much of contemporary British learning and culture was steeped in Christian ideas; indeed, Duff argued, “in the very act of acquiring English, the mind, in grasping the import of new terms, is perpetu­ally brought in contact with the new ideas, the new truths, . . . so that, by the time that the language has been mastered, the student must be tenfold less the child of Pantheism, idolatry and superstition than before.” Indians, he complained, were not impressed by the “evidences” invoked by the missionaries of that period in support of the claims of the gospel, and the most promising solution to the problem was in effect to Anglicize their patterns of thinking, their basic terms of reference: then they would understand. Duff thus provided a powerful restatement of the concept of Western educa­tion as praeparatio evangile.

Duff supported his insistence of English-language education with the negative arguments that the only alternatives—the local vernacular and Sanskrit—were both impracticable, though for different reasons. Bengali, he argued, was not sufficiently developed for use as the medium of higher education: Duff, himself a High­lander who had had an English education, compared its role to that of Gaelic in the Scottish Highlands. As for Sanskrit, it was insepara­bly associated with Hinduism—that “stupendous system of er­ror.” And he was fortunate in that his arrival in Calcutta in 1830 coincided with a growing movement in favor of English among In­dians, the other missionaries, and government officials. By then small but influential groups of Indians, including the young radical secularists and an older group led by the reformer Ram Mohan Roy, were strongly in favor of English education. They had a genuine interest in British culture, which they believed would help to regenerate India from what they saw as its “medieval” backwardness, combined with a recognition of its growing value as a qualifi­cation for employment by private firms and above all in govern­ment service. The English missionaries had hitherto used the vernacular as the medium in their schools, while the Serampore Baptists had at first laid particular stress on Sanskrit in the college which they had founded in 1818; but by the end of the 1820s they were all showing signs of a new appreciation of the importance of English. And the government, which until then had given its pa­tronage primarily to institutions of a traditional oriental pattern, in 1835 took the momentous step of decreeing that henceforth its funds should be devoted to English education. This decision was reinforced by others, which in effect made English the official lan­guage of British India. Duff’s enthusiasm for English education was thus aptly timed; but he did not merely swim with the tide: he made important contributions to the development of the new policy in the period of controversy which preceded its adoption. The example of his school, as an English-medium institution which attained rapid success, was one of the factors that influ­enced Bentinck’s administration to make the change of 1835—and
The success of Duff's methods in fact earned him an extraordinary prestige within a very few years of his arrival in Calcutta, all the more remarkable as he was only twenty-four in 1830 and he went into a situation where missionaries and government had been wrestling with the problems of education for a generation and more. After some initial criticism, other missionaries, particularly of the London and the Church Missionary societies, hastened to establish English schools or reorganize their existing educational work on the lines of the General Assembly's institution. And Duff's influence was by no means confined to Bengal: his example was important in persuading his fellow Scot John Wilson to establish an English school in Bombay in 1832—indeed it was crucial, as Wilson showed no interest in English education and little enthusiasm for schools of any kind before he started receiving reports of Duff's success. Duff's example was therefore significant for the establishment of the institution which was to develop into the celebrated Wilson College, Bombay. Other ways in which Duff's influence spread was through his former pupils' going out to teach in missionary and government schools throughout India.

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Duff made further contributions to the general development of education policy in India, most notably in that magna carta of the system known as Wood's Despatch (1854). Among the proposals for which he argued and which were adopted was the principle of grants-in-aid by government for all schools, by whomsoever conducted, which provided a good education as attested by government inspectors. This education was to be essentially in Western learning, through the medium of English and the vernaculars—by this time Duff's original concentration on English education for an elite had been complemented by a recognition of the importance of vernacular elementary education for the mass of the population. Duff did not entirely have his way when it came to religious education, however: while he conceded the principle of government neutrality in its oversight of education, he proposed voluntary Bible classes for government schools and colleges, which the government, however, felt would compromise that neutrality. But on the need to establish universities his views were in accord with government's, and when the University of Calcutta was founded in 1857 Duff played an active role in its development prior to his final departure from India in 1863.

Duff was above all a missionary educator, and his main legacy was the network of Christian colleges, using English as their medium and combining Christian religious teaching with a wide range of secular subjects, which by the end of the nineteenth century were to be found in every part of the Indian subcontinent. Although not strictly the pioneer, it was he probably more than any other individual who ensured that the missions would play a major role in the secondary and higher education of India. The result of this endeavor was not, as he had hoped and expected, a mass of converts into the visible church, followed by the collapse of Hinduism—though his converts did include several noteworthy individuals whose careers had a significance beyond their actual number. What mainly occurred was a considerable permeation of the Indian intelligentsia with Christian values and attitudes, not only through the intellectual encounter with Christianity that took place in the colleges but through the innumerable personal contacts with Christian staff members who in a variety of ways made an impression on their students. One should also not forget the part that the Christian colleges played, together with other institutions of higher education, in familiarizing Indians with general Western (especially British) concepts and institutions—for example, parliamentary democracy and nationalism, with such momentous consequences for the modern history of the country.

Having said this, one must also note that certain aspects of Duff's policy came to be regarded very critically by subsequent generations. In the first place, he not only shared to the full the attitude of wholesale condemnation of the non-Christian religions that virtually all missionaries at that period expressed, but he had none of the scholarly interest in Indian culture that some of them—especially the Serampore Baptists and John Wilson—nevertheless displayed. Although Duff allowed Sanskrit and Persian to be taught in his school, and agreed that they must have a place in the University of Calcutta, his insistence that Western learning was superior and Eastern inferior—indeed intrinsically pernicious—was no help toward the necessary synthesis of the two cultures, and as far as the Indian church was concerned contributed to that sense of alienation from its Indian environment which was subsequently felt to be a major problem. Related to this was his over stressing of the importance of English, particularly in his early years: although he subsequently admitted the educational value of the vernaculars, at least for elementary education, his initial dismissal of them—at a time when promising efforts were being made by others to develop them—must have contributed to keeping them in a relatively lowly position for a long period. And these criticisms were not made only with the benefit of years of hindsight: Duff was trenchantly criticized in the mid-1830s by, among others, John Wilson and John Clark Marshman of Serampore. Wilson criticized, among other things, Duff's policy on language and went on to work out a relationship between English, Sanskrit, and the vernaculars which recognized the value and significance of each. Marshman provided a radical critique of Duff's argument for the virtual necessity of an intellectual Anglicization to facilitate conversion: he both denied the necessity and pointed out that if it was carried through, Indians would become "unnaturalised in their own country." At one level, therefore, Duff may be seen as a heroic figure who revitalized missionary education in India; at another, as one whose very success bequeathed a somewhat ambiguous legacy to India and its church.
Notes

1. This article is largely based on the author’s *Missionaries and Education in Bengal 1793–1837* (London, 1972), esp. chapters 7 and 8.


7. Ibid., p. 519.


10. D. B. Forrester, “Christianity and Early Indian Nationalism,” Sixth European Conference, Paris, 1978. Professor Forrester shows that the missionaries made a peculiar contribution to the development of a sense of nationalism in India by arguing that only Christianity could provide a proper foundation for it.


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Biographies


Works by Duff

A large number of Duff’s addresses, etc. were published. Following is a selection of the more important ones.

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