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# Reinterpreting the History of Secondary Education: The Case of England in the 1940s and 1950s

*Gary McCulloch*

UCL Institute of Education, UK
g.mcculloch@ucl.ac.uk | 0000-0002-5675-2776

**Abstract**

This article describes and reflects on reinterpretations of the history of secondary education in England in the 1940s and 1950s, following the Education Act of 1944 and the creation of a so-called 'tripartite' system of different kinds of secondary schools. It questions the notion that there was a gradual transition and change of focus from the elite secondary education of the 1920s and 1930s to the mass secondary education of the 1960s. In particular, it examines the underlying continuities in the Platonic ideals of 'education for leadership' that revolved around the Norwood Report of 1943 and the curriculum of the secondary schools, and how these were linked over the longer term to the elite traditions of the great public (independent) schools of the nineteenth century.

**Keywords:**
*Secondary education; England; 1944 Education Act; Tripartite system*

## Reinterpretar la historia de la educación secundaria: El caso de Inglaterra en los años 40 y 50

**Resumen**

Este artículo describe y reflexiona sobre las reinterpretaciones de la historia de la enseñanza secundaria en Inglaterra en las décadas de 1940 y 1950, tras la Ley de Educación de 1944 y la creación del llamado sistema «tripartito» de diferentes tipos de centros de enseñanza secundaria. Cuestiona la noción de que hubo una transición gradual y un cambio de enfoque desde la educación secundaria de élite de los años veinte y treinta a la educación secundaria de masas de los sesenta. En particular, examina las continuidades subyacentes en los ideales platónicos de «educación para el liderazgo» que planeaban sobre al Informe Norwood de 1943 y al plan de estudios de los centros de secundaria, y cómo éstos se vincularon a largo plazo con las tradiciones elitistas de los grandes *public schools* (independientes) del siglo XIX.

**Palabras claves:**
*Educación secundaria; Inglaterra; Ley de Educación de 1944; Sistema tripartito*





## Introduction

Secondary education has attracted a great deal of attention from historians over the years (McCulloch, 2012) and this historical interest has not diminished, with book series, special issues of journals and large funded research projects recently committed to the history of secondary education. Interpretations of the historical nature and role of secondary education have changed at the same time, so that what were once widely regarded

in fairly unproblematic terms as great engines of social mobility have been problematised in many different ways. This has certainly been true in the context of the history of secondary education in twentieth century England, especially in relation to the Education Act of 1944 and the character of 'secondary education for all' from the 1940s until the 1960s.

The 1950s have often been overlooked or assumed to have been a gradual transition period in terms of a change in focus from elite secondary education before the Second World War, to mass secondary education from the 1960s. Peter Mandler has emphasised the 'transition to mass education', arguing that the transition to mass education in Britain began in the 1940s (Mandler, 2020, p. 123). Secondary education for all was initially implemented mainly on the basis of providing different types of schools for differing aptitudes and abilities, in three types of schools – grammar, technical and modern. Yet there were significant underlying continuities between the 1940s and 1950s despite the apparent changes.

What, then, was the fundamental character of secondary education in England in the years following the Education Act of 1944? Initially, optimistic assessments suggested a general growth in equality of opportunity stemming from the reforms of the 1940s. Subsequent verdicts were more critical, and tended to emphasise structural inequalities on lines of social class and gender. A further assessment linked modern secondary education with the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, especially *The Republic* (Plato c. 380 BC / 1976), his ideals of education for leadership, and his vision of society. This also provided scope for a reinterpretation of the Norwood Report of 1943, *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools* (Board of Education, 1943), which was the avowed inspiration for the tripartite system. Furthermore, it offered a means to interpret the basis of curriculum differences in secondary education, which persisted in subsequent decades. The present article seeks to reflect on the historical reinterpretations offered in this recent body of work on English secondary education in the 1940s and 1950s (see also McCulloch, 2015a).



## Changing interpretations of the 1944 Education Act

Reinterpretations of secondary education as it developed in England following the Education Act of 1944 took place in a broad intellectual and policy context that highlighted the importance of this particular sector. In terms of the historiography of education, such reinterpretations were an aspect of revisionist and critical scholarship. Earlier liberal-progressive perspectives had viewed changes in the education system as progressing steadily towards improvement for the benefit of all, providing greater individual opportunities and enhancing national prosperity. New research challenged such interpretations and emphasised the tensions and inequalities that underlay educational provision (McCulloch, 2012).

Internationally, secondary education has attracted considerable attention from historians especially since the 1980s. In the USA, for example, a number of important studies were produced by Labaree, Reese, Herbst and others (Labaree, 1989, Kridel and Bullough, 2007 Steele, 2022). In many other countries, such as Canada, China, Germany, new work was also forthcoming to constitute overall an impressive body of literature (Albisetti, 1988, Gidney, 1990, Thogerson, 1990). In 2004, a special issue of the international journal *Paedagogica Historica* was devoted to 'Secondary education: institutional, cultural and social history' following a

meeting in Paris of the International Standing Conference for the History of Education, including a wide range of new research in many different countries (*Paedagogica Historica, 2004*). A series of books on 'Secondary education in a changing world', edited by Franklin and McCulloch for Palgrave Macmillan in New York, similarly found extensive scope for a wide range of national historical studies for example on the USA, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand (Sherington and Campbell, 2006, VanOverbeke, 2008, Openshaw, 2009). It also highlighted international comparisons in relation to the history of comprehensive schooling and of secondary education for girls (Wiborg, 2009, Albisetti, Goodman and Rogers, 2010).

This growth of interest in the history of secondary education occurred partly because secondary schools related well to many different social, economic and political issues. As Savoie et al pointed out, 'It is precisely because it raises the issues of the connection between school and society – on such matters as culture; national identities; elitism, meritocracy and social democracy; the gender gap; moral and civic values and behaviours; vocational skills – that the history of secondary education is so fascinating.' (Savoie, Bruter and Frijhoff, 2004, p. 14). It also grew at this time because secondary education was itself an increasingly controversial issue. This was certainly true in England, particularly in relation to comprehensive schools. After the 1960s, comprehensive schooling was consolidated as the dominant pattern of secondary education, but then a succession of reforms gave renewed emphasis to specialisation and differentiation. Under Conservative Governments from 1979 to 1997, and then Labour Governments from 1997 until 2010, secondary education became a principal focus for initiatives designed to improve standards, and which led to much stronger control being exerted to allow further change (McCulloch, 202012). Interpretations of the history of secondary education were conducted against a background of heated political debates, and were in part at least a response to these.



These contemporary debates were clearly reflected in the historiography of secondary education, as more or less settled accounts of secondary education as gradual change and improvement over the long term became invaded by doubts and contentions over rival nostrums. At the same time, the history of education responded to broader developments in social history which became a specialised academic field in Britain from the 1950s and 1960s (Obelkevich, 2000). R.L. Archer's history of secondary education in the nineteenth century (Archer, 1921), and John Graves' account of 'policy and progress' in the decades following the Education Act of 1902 (Graves, 1943) were chronological and factual depictions of gradual social progress, such as were familiar in the history of education literature of that time. In the 1950s, the sociologist Olive Banks documented the controversies around the social functions of the different kinds of secondary education, and in particular the social implications of grammar schools (Banks, 1955). Growing awareness of the social inequalities involved in secondary education helped to generate a more critical historical literature addressing issues of social class, such as in the work of Brian Simon (Simon, 1974) and later those of gender, for example by Felicity Hunt (Hunt, 1991). A number of critical overviews and interpretations served to emphasise the unresolved problems of secondary education in the twentieth century (for example Lowe, 1989, McCulloch, 2001, McCulloch, 2004a, Richardson, 2011). The history of secondary education in Scotland (Paterson, 1983;

Anderson, 1983, 1985) and Wales (Evans, 1990, 2008) also stimulated much more critical scholarship than in earlier decades.

These changes in interpretation were also evident in relation to the 1944 Education Act and the secondary education of the 1940s and 1950s. Early commentators such as Harold Dent pointed out the high ideals of the wartime educational reformers. Dent argued that public education had made considerable progress since the eighteenth century, and put the provisions of the 1944 Act in this long-term historical context to demonstrate the 'almost unbelievable change' that had come about since that time (Dent, 1952, p. 19). These achievements began to appear less impressive by the 1960s as the failures and disappointments of the Act became more widely apparent. The continuities represented in the Act also appeared no less evident than the changes that it helped to bring about (McCulloch, 1994, p. 49).

Growing dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the 1944 Act was further encouraged by the development of more radical interpretations that portrayed it in terms of a conspiracy on the part of politicians and officials. According to this general viewpoint, the Board of Education and its advisors constituted a self-serving elite group in ultimate control of education policy, imbued with common values arising from their public school education, and with common class interests in restricting and manipulating educational reform. The survival of the independent or 'public' schools despite their widespread unpopularity during the war was an important indicator of such a conspiracy, and the Fleming committee on the public schools an example of the kind of mechanism that was used to ensure the maintenance of social stability.



The Norwood Report of 1943 also played a key role in this interpretation. It was portrayed as a device that was intended to channel the heightened expectations for reform that existed during the war years into socially conservative directions. In particular, its preference for three different types of secondary school, rather than for one single type, was criticised for being socially divisive and elitist. Its elaborate rationale in favour of tripartism in secondary education became the focus of critical attention especially when the grammar schools maintained their dominance after the war. Because of the strategic position of the Norwood Report, published as it was the year before the 1944 Act, it could be portrayed as the darker side of the 1944 settlement, the handbrake on a generally progressive reform. While the 1944 Act itself made no reference to different types of secondary school, the quasi-official support given to the idea in the Norwood Report appeared to provide justification for a tripartite system.

The chairman of the Norwood committee, Sir Cyril Norwood, was himself a convenient target for criticism which tended to strengthen the view that the Report was reactionary and socially divisive. Norwood was much more attuned to the traditions, problems and possibilities of public schools and grammar schools. His idealisation of an 'English tradition of education' was strongly reflected in the Norwood Report. His position in the charmed circle of advisors to the Board of Education, no less than his social background and his advancing years, made it straightforward to label him as a bastion of conservative forces determined to prevent wholesale or radical reforms in education. It was concluded that Norwood controlled the agenda of his committee, and that the final Report had a

widespread influence in persuading the Ministry of Education and local education authorities to favour a tripartite system after the war, rather than to adopt the pattern of a common secondary school for all.

The left-wing historian Brian Simon was foremost in developing this radical reinterpretation of the 1944 Act. According to Simon, the politics of the Norwood committee itself were 'devious and multifarious' and 'shrouded in a certain amount of mystery' (Simon, 1986, p. 38). Yet its establishment was a 'master-stroke' because it provided 'an ideological underpinning for the tripartite system' (Simon, 1986, pp. 38-39). It thus 'appeared to lay down a clear pattern (and rationale) for a divided system of secondary education following whatever reforms were to be brought about by legislation' (Simon, 1986, p. 39). The 'devious practice' that it involved led directly to the strengthening of 'selection and an elitist structure' (Simon, 1986, p. 40; see also Simon, 1974, pp. 323-33, and Simon, 1991, chapter 1). Simon concluded that as a result of this kind of 'manipulation and control' during the formulation of the 1944 Act, 'after all the discussion and legislation, the country emerged with an hierarchical educational structure almost precisely as planned and developed in the mid-late nineteenth century' (Simon, 1991, p. 74). In short, the 1944 Act itself could be regarded as a 'Conservative measure', through which 'The "New Order" in English education, celebrated by Dent and many others, turned out to be the old order in a new disguise' (Simon, 1986, p. 43).

At the same time, a right-wing critique of the 1944 Act also emerged. During the 1980s, as the Conservative government struggled with the consequences of economic decline and industrial conflict, the view gained ground that such problems were rooted in the character of the education system. Martin Wiener's highly influential work *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Wiener, 1981) emphasised the importance of the Victorian public schools in the 'shaping of a gentleman'. Wiener proposed that the nine ancient public schools examined in the Clarendon Commission of the 1860s became established, 'more or less as they were, as *the* model of secondary education for all who aspired to rise in English society' (Wiener, 1981, p. 17). In turn, this encouraged a detachment from business, commerce and industry that continued to shape British attitudes and values in the twentieth century.

This argument was highly attractive as an explanation for Britain's relative economic decline, and served to reinforce criticisms of the education system. It also carried with it significant implications for an interpretation of the 1944 Act. The reforms of the 1940s could be represented as being based on a social idealism and extravagance that were misplaced in a nation facing economic ruin, as well as favouring an old fashioned ideal of liberal education rather than the needs of modern industry and commerce. Such a view was argued in forthright terms by the military historian Correlli Barnett in his book *The Audit of War* (Barnett 1986). According to Barnett, 'Britain's post-war decline began in wartime British dreams, illusions and realities.' (Barnett, 1986, p. 8). Barnett argues that the cultural and political elite was directly responsible for encouraging what he describes as a mood of 'New Jerusalemism', and that underlying this was the pervasive influence of the public school ethos, leading to a tradition of 'education for industrial decline'.

Barnett links the 1944 Act to this tradition, and again makes the Norwood Report the most prominent target for criticism. Educational reform in the Second World War, Barnett

complains, was 'in little sense related to manpower policy or to the future industrial and export prospects so depressingly debated in other corners of Whitehall' (Barnett, 1986, p. 276). The Norwood Report itself is dismissed scathingly as an 'amazing document' and 'an exercise in hypocrisy, if not actual deception', that 'publicly affirmed in uncompromising language the prevailing outlook and beliefs of the British educational establishment, and in particular of those who controlled, and would control, the levers of the educational system' (Barnett, 1986, p. 299). The failure to develop secondary technical schools and county colleges in the 1940s and 1950s is attributed to this cultural and social malaise, a theme pursued further by historians of technical education such as Michael Sanderson and Derek Aldcroft (Aldcroft, 1992, Sanderson, 1994).

These, then, were the main frameworks of interpretation around the 1944 Education Act and secondary education in the 1980s and 1990s. They had already generated a lively debate which was of significance for historians and also for current education policies, and established some orthodoxies around the role of the Norwood Report and the characteristics of the tripartite system. These emerged as principal subjects for reinterpretation.

## Three types of mind

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead famously declared that 'The safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.' (Whitehead, 1928/1978, p. 39). Whitehead's comment was almost literally true of English secondary education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was a view that helped to explain the so-called tripartite system that emerged after the 1944 Act in terms of Plato's typology of three types of mind, described in his work *The Republic* (Plato c. 380 BC/1976). Reference to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato provided a broad framework for understanding the intellectual and cultural basis for the divisions in English secondary education, which then translated into social divisions. The fact that Cyril Norwood and many other educators of this period were avowed Platonists also made this at least a plausible point of departure.

Plato's *Republic* proposed that there were three distinct classes in society, each of which required a different kind of preparation or education. The first class, associated with gold, was that of the philosophers. The second, made of silver, comprised the 'auxiliaries', or skilled merchants and tradesmen. Last came the artisans and farmers, made of iron and copper. Plato insisted that future 'guardians' or rulers should be taken only from those made of gold. Their education would involve training in music and gymnastics, and then, for the most promising, tests of courage and particularly of self-control. Those emerging from such training would be not only philosophers but also rulers, indeed philosopher-kings, who alone would be fit to lead and serve the community as a whole. Meanwhile, the auxiliaries would be educated in a more practical rather than in an intellectual way to prepare them for their future vocations, while the mass of the population would be educated, if at all, to play their part in society in a more modest way. This was in essence a life-sized e working model of Plato's educational ideals. As John Dancy, a reforming public school headmaster, pointed out in the 1960s, 'Plato was a social and intellectual snob rolled into one, a combination

irresistible to the English. *His* intellectual theory matched and reinforced *our* traditional social practice.' (Dancy, 1965, p. 385, emphasis in original).

In the nineteenth century, the reinvigorated public schools provided the philosopher-kings; a range of technical institutions struggled to survive as an intermediate tier; the elementary schools that were grudgingly and belatedly created were clearly intended to, provide the workers of tomorrow. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the elite group was broadened to include the 'meritocracy' of the new state-aided grammar schools, almost if not quite alongside the 'aristocracy' of the public schools. The junior technical schools and the elementary schools continued in these circumstances to perform pre-ordained and familiar roles. Fred Clarke, professor of education in South Africa in the 1920s, could observe from a distance the maintenance of social distinctions in this period, reflected for instance in upper-class opinion that could see 'something incongruous and almost indecent in the phenomenon of the coachman's or butler's son learning Latin'. On this view, Latin was 'like polo or pheasant-shooting – the prerogative of a gentleman, and should not be prostituted to base plebeian churls' (Clarke, 1923, p. 51).

A wide range of influential social and political theorists in the 1920s and 1930s also exhibited a strong regard for the values articulated by Plato. Jose Harris has argued that a form of idealism imbued with the social philosophy of Plato formed 'the overarching philosophy of the early days of the welfare state' (Harris, 1992, p. 142). According to Harris, 'early twentieth- century social scientists found in Plato not simply a system of logic and epistemology, but a series of clues, principles and practical nostrums with which to approach the problems of mass, urban, class-based, industrial and imperial civilisation' (Harris, 1992, p. 127). Moreover, the 'vast majority' of these British Platonists were 'reformers, democrats and egalitarians, largely oblivious of Plato's apparent endorsement of absolute political obedience, a functional caste system, and the selective breeding of a master race' (Harris, 1992, pp. 127-28). These tendencies were especially noticeable in the field of education in the 1920s and 1930s.



A similar hierarchical pattern could be observed in the tripartite system after the Second World War. Indeed, this was noted with increasing discomfort by the classics-trained administrators of the period. Sir Robert Wood, as Deputy Secretary at the Ministry, noted that the education system was 'attaining Plato's rule that "children must be placed not according to their father's conditions, but the faculties of their minds"'. On the other hand, he conceded the possibility that it might replace 'social class distinction by equally objectionable intellectual distinctions – creating an aristocracy of intellect in the grammar schools and putting the "runners-up" in the Secondary (Technical) Schools, and "the field" in the Modern Schools' (Wood, 1946). By the 1950s, another thoughtful senior official at the Ministry, Toby Weaver, feared entrenching 'for as long as we can foresee the three-tier system of Plato's Republic that is already hardening – the "fliers", whether humanists or technologists, in academic grammar schools, the technicians and managers in second creaming technical schools, and the "pedestrians" in banausic modern schools with little hope of challenge or standard in their courses' (Weaver, 1955).

The Norwood Report of 1943 mapped out these three types of mind in precise and graphic detail. Part I of the Report identified thee 'rough groupings' of pupils which,

'whatever may be their ground, have in fact established themselves in general educational experience' (Board of Education, 1943, p. 2). It argued that these distinctions should be acknowledged and catered for in the future provision of secondary education.

The first type of mind, it proposed, was 'the pupil who is interested in learning for its own sake, who can grasp an argument or follow a piece of connected reasoning; who is interested in causes, whether on the level of human volition or in the material world; who cares to know how things came to be as well as how they are, who is sensitive to language as expression of thought, to a proof as a precise demonstration, to a series of experiments justifying a principle; he is interested in the relatedness of related things, in development, in structure, in a coherent body of knowledge'. Formerly, such pupils had been associated with the grammar schools, and they had generally gone into the learned professions or higher administrative or business posts. The curriculum best suited for these pupils was one that 'treats the various fields of knowledge as suitable for coherent and systematic study for their own sake apart from immediate considerations of occupation' (Board of Education, 1943, p. 4). According to the Report, grammar schools should continue to provide such a curriculum, in order to uphold an ideal of 'disciplined thought provided by an introduction to the main fields of systematic knowledge, which is valued first for its own sake and later invoked to meet the needs of life' (Board of Education, 1943, p. 7).

The second type of pupil was identified in the Norwood Report as showing 'interests and abilities' that lay 'markedly in the field of applied science or applied art' (Board of Education, 1943, p. 3). These pupils were held to be especially well suited to a curriculum that was 'closely, though not wholly, directed to the special data and skills associated with a particular kind of occupation', and this could be developed in secondary technical schools that would be designed for this purpose (Board of Education, 1943, p. 4).



Lastly, the Norwood Report perceived a grouping of pupils who dealt 'more easily with concrete things than with ideas', and who demanded 'immediate returns' from any endeavours. As it explained, 'His horizon is near and within a limited area his movement is generally slow, though it may be surprisingly rapid in seizing a particular point or in taking up a special line.' (Board of Education, 1943, p. 3). For these pupils it suggested a curriculum with 'a balanced training of mind and body and a correlated approach to humanities, Natural Science and the arts', not to prepare for a specific job or occupation but to 'make a direct appeal to interests, which it would awaken by practical touch with affairs' (Board of Education, 1943, p. 4). The new secondary modern schools would be well placed to cater for these pupils, according to the Report.

Thus, the Norwood Report articulated a tripartite ideology with unsurpassed acuity and enthusiasm, although it was far from alone in its support for such a structure. Such an ideal was widely advocated and was deeply rooted in the politics and society of the 1930s and 1940s (see also McCulloch, 2002). The secondary technical schools were viewed as being an important complement to the grammar schools but that they failed first and foremost because of a widespread antipathy towards technical education. Indeed, their failure was due in large part to the resistance of parents and industry, and it was Sir David Eccles, Conservative Minister of Education for much of the 1950s, who helped to prevent the further development of the schools. Thus, the secondary technical schools were not a successful

and popular policy stifled at birth by the spread of comprehensive schools, but could be seen as a policy that suffered due to social and cultural preferences and was already widely regarded as a misguided failure well before the 1960s (McCulloch, 1989, p. 7).

The Platonic leadership tradition was only partly associated with the grammar schools and was more fundamentally rooted in the Victorian public schools. For this reason, the Board of Education, strongly influenced by the public school tradition, strongly encouraged the grammar schools to imitate the ideals and practices of the public schools, and after the Second World War it was Eric James, High Master of Manchester Grammar School, who expressed Platonic ideas about education for leadership most explicitly (James, 1951). Nevertheless, this was fundamentally a story about the decline and dispersal of the classic ideology of the public schools as it mutated into different forms in a changing society (McCulloch, 1991).

The third theme, that of working class secondary education, led eventually to the failed experiment of the secondary modern schools. The early origins of this movement were identified in the higher grade schools of the late nineteenth century, and the educational debates of the 1920s and 1930s reflected a search for a distinctive type of secondary education that would be most appropriate for working class pupils. The Hadow Report of 1926 broadly supported such ideas and recognised in them 'the half-conscious striving of a highly industrialised society to evolve a type of school analogous to and yet distinct from the secondary school, and providing an education designed to fit boys and girls to enter the various branches of industry, commerce and agriculture at the age of 15' (Board of Education, 1926, p. 35). Many leading politicians and administrators, including ministers in the Labour government from 1945, hoped that the secondary modern schools would realise a new and more fulfilling approach to the education of the majority of pupils than was to be found in the academic grammar schools (McCulloch, 1998, pp. 60-65). However, by the early 1960s it was unmistakably evident that secondary modern schools tended to be seen as inferior, and that an alternative approach was urgently required.



Overall, then, Harold Dent was broadly correct when he argued in the 1950s that tripartism was 'a manifestation of the "tradition of the society", with long and deep historical roots, and should be treated as such' (Dent, 1952, p. 93). It was indeed an integral aspect of the social history of secondary education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The inequalities of secondary education were cultural as much as social and political, and the ideas and assumptions that supported them in areas such as technical education and the importance of public schools and grammar schools were widely shared. At the same time, it is also true that at different times administrative concerns and class interests and ideologies have served powerfully to reinforce this underlying and embedded approach. The 'tradition' was manipulated in ways that Dent did not concede to favour the continued dominance of grammar and public schools, and of the academic and liberal curriculum.

## Science and the sixth form in the 1950s

A further theme that became evident was the nature of the secondary school curriculum over the longer term. In particular, the elite traditions associated with the great public

schools of the nineteenth century seemed to have a continuing purchase over curriculum changes in the new phase of universal secondary education after the Second World War. For example, it was the desire to update and revise the idea of education for leadership in a changing society that helped to guide the school science initiatives of the 1950s. A key priority of the time was to equip the future elite with scientific and technological knowledge and skills, rather than the classical training that had been deemed appropriate in the Victorian period. Yet this technocratic vision retained many of the educational and social assumptions of the public schools, especially in its concern for social leadership, its preference for humanistic and liberal values, and its focus on boys rather than girls. Whereas their Victorian predecessors had looked to Classics and 'Greats' to produce Empire builders, in the 1950s the sponsors of science curriculum reform hoped to produce a cadre of leaders suited for late twentieth-century society (McCulloch, 1988).

The ideal of education for leadership was indeed to the fore in school science reform initiatives. The science periodical *Nature* described Eric James's book *Education and Leadership* (James, 1951) as a 'tract for the times', and emphasised 'the implications for to-day of the Platonic conception of education' (*Nature*, 1951). James himself was active in promoting science education with this underlying vision. Addressing the Science Masters' Association in 1955, for example, James argued that scientists should be able to use their gifts in administration and government: 'Plato envisaged his philosopher kings as having been trained in the mathematics and science of his day. We must see that his vision is realised.' (James, 1955, p. 324). Similar arguments were widely prominent. Lord Hailsham, appointed as Britain's first Minister for Science in 1959, and himself a classical scholar, suggested that science education had differing aims for three different kinds of people – the 'mass of the people', the 'bureaucracy', and the 'aristocracy'. It was the members of this last group, who 'by their talents and training have the power of making new scientific discoveries and so of keeping the whole fabric alive', who should have 'the training and equipment to enable them to discharge their task' (Hailsham, 1963, pp. 40-41). C.P. Snow's influential work on the 'two cultures' and on science and government entertained basically the same elite vision of education for leadership (Snow, 1964).

That the secondary technical schools suffered by comparison with the public and grammar schools is not altogether surprising in this broader social and historical context. In the northern industrial city of Wigan, for instance, Thomas Linacre School was established as a secondary technical school in 1953 with new, purpose-built premises and a selective pupil recruitment policy. However, it was not able to compete with Wigan Grammar School, and indeed parents showed an overwhelming preference for the latter. The traditions and reassuring shape of Wigan Grammar made it a most unequal context with Thomas Linacre's unfamiliar curriculum and modernist buildings (McCulloch, 1989, pp. 146-51). The parity of esteem that was anticipated by the educational policy makers of the 1930s and 1940s failed to eventuate because of deeply ingrained cultural and social prejudices that favoured the academic and liberal curriculum over the technical and vocational alternative.

Specific initiatives that were intended to cultivate and indeed reinvigorate an educational elite fitted for the changing requirements of the late twentieth century included the direct grant schools, the Industrial Fund, the Crowther Report, *15 to 18*, of 1959, and

the Nuffield Foundation Science Teaching Project (NFSTP). Direct grant grammar schools, created under the Education Act of 1944, were highly academically selective and constituted an elite group of grammar schools with special state funding. By the 1950s there were 178 such schools together with about 1300 grammar schools. The Industrial Fund was established in the1950s to fund new science laboratories for independent schools and direct grant schools rather than technical or modern schools. The Crowther Report, produced by the Central Advisory Council for Education created by the 1944 Act, recommended a wide range of reforms including an increase in the school leaving age from 15 to 16 and a broader conception of technical education. It was also committed to the specialisation of the sixth-form curriculum leading to the universities (Ministry of Education, 1959).

The Crowther Report of 1959, *15 to 18*, also carried distinct echoes of the tripartite and bipartite ideas of the 1940s (Ministry of Education, 1959). Chapter 35 of the Report discussed the nature of an 'Alternative Road' for non-academic pupils. It stressed that not all pupils were attracted by 'the academic tradition which inspires and is embodied in our grammar schools and universities' (Ministry of Education, 1959, p. 391). There were, indeed, 'two kinds of minds', which should be approached in different ways (Ministry of Education, 1959, p. 394). The first kind of mind was the academic type, 'which is readily attuned to abstract thinking and can comprehend the meaning of a generalisation' (Ministry of Education, 1959, p. 394). These were best catered for by grammar school education. However, it affirmed, 'There are other minds which cannot grasp the general except by way of the particular, which cannot understand what is meant by the rule until they have observed the examples' (Ministry of Education, p. 394). Such minds, which 'move more easily from the practice to the theory', or which 'reason better in non-verbal ways', were not necessarily inferior', as the Report acknowledged, and more provision should be made for them (Ministry of Education, 1959, p. 468).



Not surprisingly, Eric James was an influential member of the Crowther committee. The aim of the Crowther Report in developing this argument was, as it put it, to 'rehabilitate the practical', and thereby create a stronger rationale for a practical route including the secondary technical school. However, it failed to establish a sufficiently clear basis for this tripartite approach. It was the comprehensive school that appeared to present a fairer and more equitable approach for all pupils, and it was this that was to decisively make the running in the 1960s (McCulloch, 2015b).

Nevertheless, in 1959, of 17-year-olds who remained in school, about one-third were in direct grantor private (independent) schools. The Industrial Fund had devoted around £3 million in three years to improve science teaching in these schools. For maintained secondary schools, both the 1958-1959 and the 1959-1960 Building Programmes included projects to the value of about £2 million, designed mainly to improve facilities at grammar schools. About 120 of the maintained grammar schools in England and Wales had been built since the War, and over 150 others had received major extensions, nearly all including new laboratories. Nearly 100 more new grammar schools were under construction or had been approved, together with nearly 150 major new extensions. When all this work was completed, it was predicted, about two-thirds of the grammar schools in the country would be housed in premises that had been built or substantially improved since 1945 (Jameson, 1959).

This was a highly significant fresh investment in an academically elite group which already had decisive advantages culturally politically and economically.

A further initiative that reached its fruition in the early 1960s might be said to belong to what Stephanie Spencer has described as the 'long 1950s' (Spencer, 2005). This was the NFSTP, the first national curriculum project held in the UK, which owed its origins to discussions on science in the grammar and public schools held in the 1950s. Nuffield Ordinary level Physics was the first project to be developed under the auspices of the NFSTP, in 1962, drawing on the elite traditions of science in the more progressive independent schools to cultivate the 'spirit of inquiry' in the 'enquiring mind' (see McCulloch, 2020). This established a national model for curriculum reform, but it was found to be difficult in practice to translate its founding principles and aims to the new demands of the comprehensive schools.

## Concluding reflections

The 1940s have an obvious attraction for historians of educational reform, and the implications of the Education Act of 1944 remain worthy of debate. Similarly, the reforms of the 1960s are fascinating in their own right in their significance for the modern era of education. Yet it is insufficient and misleading to disregard the 1950S. This decade did not constitute a straight line or a gradual transition between an elite form of secondary education and mass secondary education. It was, rather, a key period in which elite secondary education was reconstituted. The reforms of the 1950s bore a family resemblance to the ideals of the Victorian era, and even more a striking continuity with the policies of the 1940s.



We can go even further than this, and suggest that the preoccupations of the 1950s give a cue to the limitations of the reforms developed in the 1960s. There was too little preparation for the future of mass secondary education, while the prospects of elite secondary education consumed so much attention. It should come as no surprise that in the 1960s, Jackson and Marsden foresaw the danger of education creating a new type of ruling elite, commenting that 'the old purpose of education – the training of a ruling elite – has not collapsed under the new purpose – the training of enough able people to man our technological society'. Indeed, as they concluded, More and more - as Eton builds its science blocks – the two are allies, putting the same people into the same place at the same price' (Jackson and Marsden, 1966).

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## Biography

**Gary McCulloch**

Is the inaugural Brian Simon Professor of the History of Education at the founding director of the International Centre for Historical research in Education at UCL Institute of Education. He was (2017-2019) the president of the British Educational Research Association and is past Editor (2015-2022) of the British Journal of Educational Studies. He is a past president of the UK History of Education Society (2005-2007) and a previous Editor of the international Journal History of Education (1996-2002). Fuente: https://profiles.ucl.ac.uk/48642-gary-mcculloch

Gary McCulloch

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