

**Bonavista 1727:  
Rev. Henry Jones and Newfoundland's First School**

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Education in Newfoundland and Labrador, similar to the rest of the provinces and territories of Canada, is directly controlled and supported by the Provincial Government through the Department of Education. However, this was not always the case. Indeed, public funding of schools in Newfoundland did not start until the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and then in the form of educational grants to the various denominations.<sup>1</sup> Before then, schools were established by religious missionaries and funded by local inhabitants and Christian groups in Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it is not surprising that the first documented school established in Newfoundland in 1727 at Bonavista was founded by Anglican missionary Henry Jones and supported by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Lands (SPG).

Reverend Jones arrived in Bonavista in May 1725 under the sponsorship of the Bishop of London, Edmund Gibson.<sup>3</sup> At the time, the community was the most northerly of English settlements in Newfoundland and the centre for the northern cod fishery. It was attacked several times by the French in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century and ultimately became part of the French Shore per the Anglo-French Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. This had little effect on Bonavista and the community continued to expand.<sup>4</sup> The population was generally made up of three distinct groups: merchants, planters and servants, numbering

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<sup>1</sup> The 1836 Act for the Encouragement of Education. Robert H Cuff and Melvin Baker, "Schools" in *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland*, Vol. V, edited by Cyril F. Poole (St. John's: Harry Cuff Book Publishers Ltd., 1994), 101.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Christian groups active in Newfoundland in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, as well as early Education legislation see Joseph Duncan MacDonald, "Denominational Attitudes Toward the Subdivision of the 1874 Protestant Grant to Education in Newfoundland" (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Great Britain, The National Archives (TNA/PRO), Lambeth Palace Library, Fulham Papers, Vol. I (1725-1735), 19-20, Henry Jones to the Bishop of London, 6 November 1725, and Jones to S.P.G. Secretary, 6 November 1725, as cited in Gay J. Peddle-White, "A History of the SPG-Sponsored Schools in Newfoundland, 1701-1822," (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2001), 66.

<sup>4</sup> Janet E Miller Pitt, "Bonavista" in *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland*, Vol. I, edited by Joseph R. Smallwood (St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1981), 214.

approximately 300 persons.<sup>5</sup> The merchants supplied the planters, who undertook the fishery, in return for a share of their catch and the planters, in turn, hired servants to assist in the catching and curing. During the winter months, the servants were hired out to the merchants or other planters to cut wood or repair fishing vessels or equipment. All of this took place without the official sanction of the British Government and, indeed, it was not until 1729 before London appointed a fulltime Governor to Newfoundland.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, many in Newfoundland felt some of the lawlessness in the colony could be attributed to the lack of religious training, especially among the “lower classes.” To this end, petitions were sent by the more “respectable” residents of Newfoundland to the hierarchy of the Church of England requesting that Anglican missionaries be sent to the island. In 1701, the Reverend John Jackson was appointed to St. John’s and was subsequently made a missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Lands (SPG), a newly formed organization founded to establish and support Church of England missions throughout the British colonies.<sup>7</sup> The Society ultimately provided and supported clergy for a number of communities in Newfoundland, and by

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<sup>5</sup> Miller Pitt, “Bonavista,” 214 and Hans Rollmann and Bonita Power, “Bonavista’s ‘Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water’: The First School in Newfoundland,” *Bulletin of the Humanities Association of Canada*, 17/1 (April 1989), 27-33. Accessed 27 July 2012 at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/ang/texts/ang2.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Initially, the first captain of the migratory fishing fleet to reach a harbour became the “Fishing Admiral” of that harbour and dispensed justice as he saw fit for that fishing season. This form of authority eventually evolved into the commander of the Royal Navy ships escorting the fleet becoming the Governor of Newfoundland for the season. This, however, left the residents of the Island with no formal authority during the winter months. In 1723, 51 leading residents of St. John’s agreed to establish their own court and elected three members to be magistrates. These three men dispensed justice, both criminal and civil, for the following winter. In 1727, the RN convoy commander, Captain St. Lo, independent of London, appointed a winter Justice for St. John’s. The British Board of Trade concluded that this did not contravene the “Newfoundland Act”(King William’s Act 1699) but it might have prompted London’s decision to appoint Captain Henry Osborn as fulltime Governor in 1729. Jeff A. Webb, “Leaving the State of Nature: A Locke-Inspired Political Community in St. John’s, Newfoundland, 1723”. *Acadiensis* XXI, 1 (Autumn 1991), 156-165. See also Frederic F. Thompson, “Henry Osborn (Osborne),” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*. University of Toronto/Université Laval. Accessed September 2, 2012 at <http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?BioId=36222>.

<sup>7</sup> Garfield Fizzard, “Newfoundland’s First Known School,” *Newfoundland Studies* (Special Topic Issue: Education and Society), 11, 2 (1995), 179-181.

1826, there were 13 SPG-sponsored schools in the colony, the largest of which were at St. John's and Bonavista (100 students).<sup>8</sup> Although Rev. Jones initially arrived in Bonavista under the personal patronage of Bishop Gibson, he too soon became a missionary of the SPG.<sup>9</sup>

Jones immediately appreciated the importance of teaching the poor children of Bonavista, and at his first meeting with his congregation, he raised the subject of establishing a school. The response was positive, with the more well-to-do members of the community pledging to each sponsor a poor child. By the fall of 1726, Jones reported to the Secretary of the SPG that he had raised enough funds to hire a schoolmistress and open the school the following spring.<sup>10</sup> The SPG, in turn, decided that it would send him a gratuity of £30, as well as, £5 worth of religious texts.<sup>11</sup> This was shortly increased to a gratuity of £40 and three dozen Bibles, three dozen New Testaments and five dozen spelling books.<sup>12</sup>

Jones' school was modeled after other Charity Schools established by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) of which the SPG was an offshoot. First established in England in the late 1600s, the SPCK provided guidance as to philosophy, curriculum and methodologies, as well as, the responsibilities and qualifications of teachers.<sup>13</sup> Religion was at the centre of all of the SPCK/SPG schools both in England and abroad, and the one in Bonavista was no different. Its sponsors felt

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<sup>8</sup> Cuff and Baker, "Schools," 101.

<sup>9</sup> Fizzard, "Newfoundland's First Known School," 181.

<sup>10</sup> Jones to SPG Secretary, Covent Gardens, England, 17 February 1727, SPG Letter Book, Series A, Volume 119, 285-287, as cited in Peddle-White, "A History of the SPG-Sponsored Schools," 69.

<sup>11</sup> SPG Minutes, 21 January 1726 as cited in James B. Healey, "An Educational History of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Newfoundland, 1708 – 1850" (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1994), 16.

<sup>12</sup> SPG Minutes, 17 February 1726 as cited in Healey, "An Educational History," 17.

<sup>13</sup> Fizzard, "Newfoundland's First Known School," 181-183, and Rollmann and Power, "Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water."

that the key to salvation for the poor was adherence to the theology and practices of the Anglican faith. They believed that religious instruction would “inculcate the children against the habits of sloth, debauchery and beggary, which characterized the lower orders of society.”<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that by “salvation,” SPCK/SPG supporters were not trying to improve the poorer classes’ social conditions. Rather, the charity school curriculum was geared to make poor children happy with their lot.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, such people felt that elevating the poor from their station “would be injurious to the community.”<sup>16</sup> As a man of his time, Jones embraced this philosophy and noted in a letter to his supporters in England that most of his students’ “knowledge and practice of the Duty as Christians...is very much wanted through [the] Poverty and Ignorance of their Parents.”<sup>17</sup> The parents in question were poorer planters and their servants, but as there was only one school, the children of the more prosperous of the community would have also attended. This was somewhat unique for Charity Schools as, in Britain, the classes did not mix in an academic environment.<sup>18</sup>

It appears that Jones intended to open a second school during the following winter where he would teach writing and arithmetic to his more “capable” students. Charity School curriculum was mainly limited to reading, some writing and arithmetic, and vocational training. Boys were taught vocations such as accounting and navigation - which required arithmetic and writing - and animal husbandry, while girls were instructed

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<sup>14</sup> MG Jones, *The Charity School Movement* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1964), 4, as quoted in Fizzard, “Newfoundland’s First Known School,” 183.

<sup>15</sup> Rollmann and Power, “Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water.” See also Gordon Billard, “Early Newfoundland Schools and the Curriculum,” *Newfoundland Quarterly* XCIII:3&4 (Spring/Summer 2000), 21, and Fizzard, “Newfoundland’s First Known School,” 193.

<sup>16</sup> The Bishop of Norwich as quoted in Rollmann and Power, “Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water.”

<sup>17</sup> Fulham Papers, Vol. I, 17-18 as cited in Fizzard, “Newfoundland’s First Known School,” 183. See also Rollmann and Power, “Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water.”

<sup>18</sup> Billard, “Early Newfoundland Schools,” 22, and Fizzard, “Newfoundland’s First Known School,” 183-185.

in knitting, needlework and housewifery in preparation for domestic service. Jones does not differentiate whether the more capable students were also of the upper classes of Bonavista, so it is probable that Jones' intention was to teach the boys of the community himself and have the schoolmistress teach the girls.<sup>19</sup> To this end, Jones' schools would have had four basic classes: the first taught the rudiments of reading using a "horn book,"<sup>20</sup> primer and spelling book; the second read the Psalter (a book of Psalms) and the New Testament; the third read the whole Bible and learned to write; the fourth learned to write well and was taught arithmetic. Girls were rarely exposed to the latter<sup>21</sup>

It should be pointed out that one of the major contributions made to the field of education by the Charity School system was the professionalization of its teachers. Teachers were required to teach fulltime, eight hours a day during the summer and seven during the winter, and measures were taken to ensure competence. To this end, qualifications were as much religious and ethical as pedagogical. Some of these prerequisites included being of the Anglican faith and a regular churchgoer, of meek temper, sober lifestyle and humble behaviour, over the age of twenty-five, and proficient in writing and arithmetic, and able to give a good account of themselves before the Minister of the parish or other officer of the Church on examination.<sup>22</sup>

Jones never mentions a school building in any of his correspondence with his sponsors in England. He does state that he had raised money for constructing a church and that it was "near finished," and he would have undoubtedly kept those in England

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<sup>19</sup> Peddle-White, "A History of the SPG-Sponsored Schools," 78-79. See also Rollmann and Power "Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water."

<sup>20</sup> So called because it was, in fact, not a book but a sheet of paper or vellum attached to a small piece of wood shaped like a paddle and covered with transparent horn. Fizzard, "Newfoundland's First Known School," 188.

<sup>21</sup> Rollmann and Power, "Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water." See also Peddle-White, "A History of the SPG-Sponsored Schools," 83.

<sup>22</sup> Rollmann and Power, "Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water."

apprised of progress in building an actual school. Jones acquired a vacant dwelling upon arriving in 1725 which he had renovated and where he conducted divine services but he does not indicate that it was converted to a school after the church was completed. Consequently, it can be assumed that classes were actually held in the church or possibly his or the schoolmistress' residence, or some combination thereof.<sup>23</sup>

It does not appear that the school at Bonavista operated between 1729 and 1730. In his correspondence to both the SPG and the Bishop of London during this period, Jones does not mention the school. This could be due to a number of reasons. Some of the residents of Bonavista migrated to Fogo and Twillingate to take part in the salmon and cod fishery based out of those two communities, as well as participated in fur trapping. Jones also indicates in a 1729 letter that many of the residents of Bonavista were sick and this would have had an effect on both subscription and school attendance. Jones himself attributes the interruption to his being appointed Justice of the Peace by Governor Henry Osborn and wrote to the Bishop of London that most of the servants had withdrawn their support as he had been forced to punish some "lawless persons for their offences."<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, by the summer of 1731 Jones wrote that "between 20 and 30 children" were again being educated at Bonavista. Jones does not indicate if he had to collect subscriptions to hire a schoolmistress as he did in 1727, so it is entirely possible that the student body was made up of both the poor of the community and paying

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<sup>23</sup> Peddle-White, "A History of the SPG-Sponsored Schools," 77-78, and Healey, "An Educational History," 16.

<sup>24</sup> Peddle-White, "A History of the SPG-Sponsored Schools," 74, 80 and FM Buffett, "Henry Jones," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* (University of Toronto/Université Laval), accessed 15 August 2012 at <http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?BioId=35543>. See also Hans Rollmann, "Exploring History of Priests and Judges," *The Telegram* (St. John's, NL), August 11, 2012, D3.

students whose fees covered the costs of the less fortunate. Jones does not mention the school in his letters for the next few years but in his 1735 report, he refers to there being two schools operating at Bonavista. Again, it is not clear whether they were divided between paying and nonpaying students or between boys and girls, but it is most likely that the latter was the case or possibly that there were two different grades.<sup>25</sup> While the SPCK frowned upon mixing social classes, it was a fairly common practice in the North American colonies at this time. Unfortunately, there is no more mention of the schools for the remainder of Henry Jones' tenure in Bonavista but it is apparent that some kind of formal education did continue. Correspondence during the years 1740 and 1741, indicate that the SPCK and the SPG sent Jones several dozen religious and educational texts during this period.<sup>26</sup>

Jones left Bonavista for Trinity in 1742. His place was taken by William Peasely who arrived in Bonavista on 19 June 1743. Similar to his predecessor, Peasely immediately set about educating the children of the community, reserving "four hours every day to teach as many children (of which there is a great number) to read that time will permit." To that end, he asked the SPG to send him Common Prayer Books, primers and Psalters. The Society agreed to send him the books and also a £10 gratuity for his teaching efforts. Further, it agreed that if he chose to continue teaching the poor of the community, it would add an additional £10 to his yearly salary. This was the first time that the SPG agreed to give direct support to an educator in Newfoundland.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, Peasley's tenure in Bonavista was short-lived as the people of the community could not maintain his income and he left for St. John's in October 1744

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<sup>25</sup> Rollmann and Power "Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water."

<sup>26</sup> Peddle-White, "A History of the SPG-Sponsored Schools," 74-75, 84-85.

<sup>27</sup> Peddle-White, "A History of the SPG-Sponsored Schools," 86-87.

where he established another SPG school. Thus ended formal schooling in Bonavista until 1791, when the SPG once again sponsored a school teacher for the community.<sup>28</sup> In the meantime, the Society established several more schools throughout Newfoundland including ones at St. John's, Harbour Grace, Scilly Cove (Winterton), Carbonear, and eventually Burin, Bay Roberts, Brigus and Portugal Cove.<sup>29</sup> As previously mentioned, by 1826 there were 13 SPG-supported schools in Newfoundland. To compete against this growth in Anglican education in Newfoundland other denominations, especially Irish Catholics, also established schools and by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, a full, government aided, denominational school system was in place and would remain so until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>30</sup>

There is little argument among scholars that the first formal school in Newfoundland was founded at Bonavista by Rev. Henry Jones in 1727.<sup>31</sup> What is clearly interesting is that he established the school through the sponsorship of the people of Bonavista and it was only after he had raised sufficient funds and acquired the services of a schoolmistress that he sought support from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in the form of teaching materials and a yearly gratuity. While one cannot argue

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<sup>28</sup> Peddle-White, "A History of the SPG-Sponsored Schools," 87-89, and Solomon P Whiteway, "Education in Newfoundland (to 1949)," in *The Encyclopedia of Canada: Newfoundland Supplement*, edited by W Stewart Wallace (Toronto: University Associates of Canada, 1949). Accessed 27 July, 2012 at <http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/nfldhistory/NewfoundlandEducation.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Fizzard, "Newfoundland's First Known School," 194; and Cuff and Baker, "Schools," 100.

<sup>30</sup> Cuff and Baker, "Schools," 100-106. See also Gordon Billard, "Early Newfoundland Schools," 22-28; Phillip McCann, "Introduction," *Newfoundland Studies* (Special Topic Issue: Education and Society), 11, 2 (1995), 171-178; Paul Collins, "The Irish Christian Brothers in Newfoundland: The First Twenty-Five Years," (Unpublished paper, Memorial University of Newfoundland, March 2000) and Whiteway, "Education in Newfoundland."

<sup>31</sup> Fredrick Rowe puts the date at 1722 or 1723 in his 1964 study *The Development of Education in Newfoundland* but more recent research clearly indicates 1727. Fredrick W. Rowe, *The Development of Education in Newfoundland* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1964), 28. Olaf Jensen's criticisms of Garfield Fizzard's essay are mainly directed at his reliance on outdated contextual material not Fizzard's assertion that Jones' school was the first in Newfoundland. Olaf Janzen, "Response to Garfield Fizzard's Essay, 'Newfoundland's First Known School,'" *Newfoundland Studies*, 12, 1 (1996), 50 – 53, and e-mail to author, 4 September 2012.

that this school was the beginning of extensive institutional education in Newfoundland, it does mark the start of formal schooling in the province and the foundation of the denominational education system that was in place for almost 300 years.

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