

## **MUFF, CO. DONEGAL - SCHOOLS IN THE 1800s**

**Sean Beattie**

**In the early 1800s the village of Muff had more in common with the city of Derry than with the rest of Donegal. It was well served by schools and there were no less than six in the immediate vicinity of the village.**

**The Harts took a keen interest in the development of the village, first by building a church and later a school at Culmore. The Dean of Derry was patron of a school in the village attended by one hundred pupils, mostly Protestant children. Such schools were often referred to as English schools as English was the main language of instruction. English was spoken freely in the district and in 1835, it was described as “a pure dialect of the English tongue”.**

**Two private schools had a total of ninety in attendance and the pupils were mainly Catholic. It is most likely that these were Hedge Schools, established by local families to provide a basic education. Teachers taught in barns or disused buildings and attendance was generally poor. Students paid a small fee to cover the cost of the teacher’s salary and also provided fuel to keep the building warm. Despite the poor conditions, there was a good standard of learning and Mathematics, Irish, History and Geography were taught. In some cases, Latin and Greek were also taught, together with navigation. According to Mrs. McHale of Muff, who was born in 1892, her great-grandfather was employed by Capt. Hart to teach in one of the schools and received a salary of £10 per year. By the standards of the time, this was a good salary. In this case, the fee paid by pupils was very small. There was no formal training course for teachers. Teachers like McHale received tuition from travelling scholars who would stay in the district for a while. Once he learned to read and write, he could avail of books available in some of the great houses or from local clergy who were educated abroad and had a working knowledge of Latin. Hedge Schools could be found throughout the county before the government established a national system of education in 1831.**

**One of the priests who had a major influence on schooling in Muff was Fr. William McLaughlin, a native of Aught, Iskaheen, born in 1776. He became parish priest of the new parish of Iskaheen when it was established in 1811 and he served for twenty-five years from 1811 to 1836. He attended the Derry Seminary and had an extensive collection of books which acted as a reference library for those who could read and write, such as McHale.**

**At this time, a number of Church societies became involved in education in order to promote Bible study and there were two such schools in Muff for a short period, often referred to as Sunday Schools. These were attended largely by Protestant children. Bibles were freely given out and books were also available free of charge. In general, such schools had the support of the local landlord and they could not have operated with the permission of the Harts, who provided sites for the schools.**

**Harts provided books for reference from their extensive library. Edward Mulhern of Ture also had a large library but access was limited to family members.**

**Muff schools are not listed in the Second Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Irish Education (1824) and for this reason it may be assumed that the schools were not in operation in the mid-1820s. Many families experienced hardship following the ending of the Napoleonic Wars and schools may have suffered as a result.**

**In the 1830s, the Muff district had an outbreak of cholera in which several children died and many of the schools in the district closed. The disease was prevalent in coastal districts of the county and in areas close to major seaports. Education in the Muff area suffered a serious setback.**

**In the mid-1800s, Carnamoyle National provided education for children in the village. In 1867, the school had a total of ninety pupils but the average attendance was only twenty-four, so that at harvest time, the school would be almost empty as children were taken to the fields to help with corn cutting and potato harvesting. The teacher received a salary of £13.6.8 but had the use of a garden and a residence. Agriculture was also taught and the garden proved vegetables and potatoes. It was believed that school gardens should be used as model plots in order to improve standards in farming. Emigration had a serious impact on the schools because of the proximity of the port of Derry. In the 1880s, there were several poor harvests and entire families were forced to emigrate, an acute feature of life in Donegal in these decades. Numbers in the school declined as a result. In 1883, there were only seventy-two pupils on the rolls, and part of the teacher's salary was based on the results of the pupils. This was the notorious Payment-by-Results system which led to many abuses in national schools.**

**An online Register of Infants in Carnamoyle School is available at [freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/carnamoyleschool](http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/carnamoyleschool) between 1872 and 1889. Several other Donegal schools are listed so this is a very useful free site.**

**The 1938 Schools' Folklore Collection provides invaluable information collected by students from local residents. The material is housed in the Folklore Commission in Dublin but is available on microfilm in Letterkenny Library.**

**Documents, maps, correspondence and reports are available for consultation in the National Archives, Dublin, in relation to the schools.**

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