

HENRY CARMICHAEL [1796 TO 1862]: AUSTRALIA'S PIONEER ADULT EDUCATOR

Roger K. Morris PhD¹

ABSTRACT: This paper outlines the important role that Henry Carmichael played in the foundation of adult education in Australia. He was the driving force in the foundation and early success of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts. He also played a very significant role in the establishment of public schooling. His wide interest in educational thought is also canvassed. Finally, his considerable achievements as a government surveyor and as a pioneer of the wine industry are considered.

Keywords: history of adult education, mechanics' institutes, public schooling

One hundred and eighty-five years ago, on October 13, 1831, the ship *Stirling Castle* arrived in the then penal colony of New South Wales (NSW) after a voyage of some four months. On board were some 59 Scottish mechanics or skilled tradesmen [including carpenters, bricklayers, stonemasons, plumbers, glaziers, and blacksmiths] who had been recruited to build a new Presbyterian college in Sydney. Also on board were their families and the core teachers who were to staff the Academy, which was to be called the Australian College (Crew, 1970).

The voyage had been organized by John Dunmore Lang (1799–1878), Australia's pioneer Presbyterian Minister, who had arrived in NSW in 1823. He soon became one of the most controversial figures in Colonial religious and political history. He was imprisoned once for debt and twice for libel. Deposed from the Presbyterian ministry in 1842, he then went on to become a long time elected politician (1843 to 1870). He was a radical democrat and Australia's first republican but he also sought to end or at least minimize the influence of the 'convict stain' (particularly the Irish Catholic variant thereof) on the colony's reputation by recruiting respectable Scottish Presbyterian immigrants. His life was, however, a mass of contradictions. Despite his militant anti-Catholic/anti-Irish views, many poorer Irish Catholics voted for him because of his radical democratic and republican views, and among the Scottish immigrants he sponsored, there happened to be some Scottish Catholics, including the future parents of Mother Mary MacKillop, Australia's first Saint (Baker, 1967).

Chief among the teachers, who travelled to Sydney on the *Stirling Castle* was Henry Carmichael (born 1796). He had matriculated to St Andrew's University in 1814 and had graduated with an M.A. in 1820. Although he was an ordained Presbyterian minister, he had pursued a career in education. Based in London he was prominent in liberal and more progressive educational circles and a follower of the English social reformer Jeremy Bentham, whose views on education – the separation of religious teaching from general education, less emphasis on teaching the classics, more emphasis on practical studies ('useful knowledge') – were strong influences on Carmichael's own thinking. Carmichael, in accepting the position, was also contracted, while still in London, to

¹ Honorary Associate Adult Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Technology Sydney, Roger.Morris@uta.edu.au

source suitable books and equipment for the new college (Turney, 1969).

A scholar of education as well as a practitioner, Carmichael was very familiar with contemporary European educational ideas, particularly the work of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) and the work of Philippe Emanuel von Fellenberg (1771–1844). Greatly impressed by their ideas, he sought to implement their work in his own educational endeavors (Nadel, 1966).

Pestalozzi emphasized that every aspect of the learner's life contributed to the formation of personality, character, and reason. Pestalozzi's educational methods were learner-centered and based on individual differences, sense perception, and the student's self-activity. Pestalozzi's ideas had an important influence on the theory of physical education, linking it to general, moral, and intellectual development, and thus reflecting his conception of harmony and human autonomy.

Fellenberg founded a self-supporting agricultural school for poor children that combined manual training with agricultural instruction and academic education. Later he founded schools for girls and for the education of teachers. His social aim, to be achieved through education, was to raise the living conditions of the poor and to create a much more inclusive society. Fellenberg's educational approach initially provoked ridicule, but gradually pupils came to him from all over Europe, both for agricultural training and for the academic and moral development associated with his approach.

Lang's plan for his Australian College seemed to suit Carmichael's educational beliefs. The college was to be divided into four departments, each supervised by a specialist master or professor, and there was to be a broad curriculum including English, mercantile instruction, mathematics and physics, and classics. The students were to be educated from an elementary standard through to a university level, with no restriction on religious denomination or social background (Turney, 1969).

On the long voyage to the new world Carmichael turned his intention to the moral and intellectual enlightenment of the mechanics. He formed a small class that met five days a week to study those aspects of arithmetic and geometry useful to the work of the mechanics. Later he also formed a class, which met twice a week to study political economy. These classes, both of which were most successful, must rank as the very first examples of formal adult education in Australia. Both Carmichael in London, and some half a dozen or so of the mechanics in Edinburgh, had had prior knowledge of, and experiences with, the then emerging Mechanics Institutes and Schools of Arts movement (Turney, 1969).

While the remote origins of the Mechanics' Institute or Schools of Arts movement may never be untangled and that while the movement's final emergence was the result of the convergence of a great many factors, George Birkbeck is generally acknowledged as its founder and Scotland as its birth place. In 1800, as Professor of Natural Philosophy at the Anderson Institute in Glasgow, he began a special course of lectures "solely for persons engaged in the practical exercise of the mechanical arts". Birkbeck, an English Quaker,

later moved back to London where he was associated with the founding of the London Mechanics' Institute.

The Mechanics' Institute was an idea whose time had come and soon purpose built schools/institutes were spreading across the English-speaking world. These schools/institutes emphasized the importance of vocational education to the health of the society, popularized the idea of science and progress, promoted the concept of individual responsibility in adult learning, and provided basic infrastructure for the later development of more formal adult and technical education, recreational facilities and local public libraries.

After arriving in Sydney, Carmichael was approached by the Colony's Governor, Sir Richard Bourke, a man much interested in education, seeking his opinion on the possibility of establishing a mechanics' institute in Sydney. Carmichael saw the opportunity for the creation of a much more comprehensive adult education enterprise than that had been envisaged on board the *Stirling Castle*, and one that could be run on the principles expounded by Jeremy Bentham in London (Carmichael, 1844).

The first meeting of interested parties was held at Carmichael's own house, at which a provisional committee was formed to devise a set of regulations for the proposed Institute. On March 22, 1833, the first public meeting to form a Mechanics' Institute was held, with approximately 200 in attendance. After a number of addresses and speeches, the meeting resolved to form the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts (SMSA), with the colony's Surveyor-General Major Thomas Mitchell elected as president of the school, the Reverend Henry Carmichael elected as vice-president (and Chief operating Officer), and the Governor as patron (Carmichael, 1844).

The object of the SMSA was to be the dissemination of scientific and other useful knowledge throughout the colony of NSW. The means to be used to attain this object were set out as follows:

- the establishment of a library and reading room
- the purchase of scientific apparatus and models
- the delivery of public lectures
- the formation of classes.

(The Sydney Herald, March 21, 1833)

Carmichael was to be the School's driving force in an administrative and managerial sense and was its principal lecturer in the early days. The School was soon a great success. Two hundred and fifty lectures were given in the 1830s on subjects ranging from chemistry, electricity and steam to "how to choose a horse", phrenology and "vulgarity in conversation". Membership increased from 91 in 1833 to 609 by 1838 when the library contained 1700 volumes. Through Governor Bourke's influence, an annual subsidy from the Legislative Council was granted. In 1836 the School moved to its own purpose-built home at 275 Pitt Street, where it remained for the next 150 years.

However, things were not going so well in Carmichael's day job. By 1833 Carmichael's enthusiasm for Lang's college had largely evaporated, as Lang's abrasive personality had

alienated many supporters and the public had grown increasingly antagonistic to the College. As the only senior master left, Carmichael, felt that the criticisms of the school's decline were being leveled unfairly at him rather than at the personal style of Lang. Carmichael was concerned that the school could never prosper under Lang's leadership, due to his private and religious interests being too closely linked to his administration of the College. In particular, Carmichael saw Lang's sectarianism as a major stumbling block (Turney, 1969).

Carmichael left the Australian College at the end of his contract in 1834, to set up his own school taking 45 of the College's students with him. Carmichael's new school, the Normal Institution, was established in January 1835. Carmichael set out his objectives for the school in the local newspapers. Carmichael said that he wished to lay the foundations of an institution for promoting the real business of education, which shall be altogether independent from the control of 'clerical interference, and undeterred by the narrow-minded enactments of 'party spirit' or 'sectarian influence'.

The school was also to act as a training ground for future teachers, with advanced students acting as teachers to more junior pupils in the school. The teachers produced by the institution would then be employable in the new National or Public School system that Governor Bourke was proposing. Based on the Irish National School model, Bourke's National Schools would be 'Public Schools' providing general education to all denominations rather than being predominantly Anglican as the schools that currently existed were (King, 1966).

As well as teaching reading, writing and arithmetic, the Normal Institution, as part of its regular curriculum, also taught modern and Oriental languages, portrait painting, drawing, dancing, gymnastics, fencing and military drill. And, in line with his opposition to the teaching of sectarian religious opinion in schools, Carmichael included the study of general religious knowledge, making students aware of the history of all religions. (Turney, 1969).

In 1838, after five years as vice-president, Carmichael retired from his formal position with the SMSA and left Sydney, moving to the rich farmlands of the Hunter Valley with his wife and family, where he worked as the government surveyor and planted vineyards on his property, Porphyry Point, near Seaham. These were to become longest lived of all the vineyards on the Williams River. Carmichael's success with winemaking meant that his wines soon became well known in the colony, and he helped to found the Hunter River Vineyard Association, became its president for a time and remained a prominent member and a leader of the wine industry (Driscoll, 1969).

Despite these new directions, Carmichael's interest in education remained undiminished. In the late 1830s he was considering establishing a school at his Porphyry Point estate, but the economic depression that hit the colony in 1840–1841 meant instead that Carmichael was forced to return to Sydney to seek employment, taking on work as a tutor instructing in grammar and mathematics, especially in relation to their application to surveying and navigation. In 1844 Carmichael was again invited to present the opening

lecture of the twelfth session of his beloved SMSA, and in doing so revisited his favorite subject: education in the colony. Carmichael's return to the public debate regarding education was met with enthusiasm in the local press, with one newspaper noting that

There are perhaps few individuals in the colony who have rendered such important services to the causes of public education as Mr. Carmichael. The establishment of the Mechanics' School of Arts was of itself no trifling influence in the dissemination of useful knowledge. (*The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, July 13, 1844)

His lecture, delivered on June 3, was titled 'How shall education best be rendered universal?' and its content returned to his earlier assertions on the benefits of a public system for schooling, distanced from sectarian religious teaching as much as possible. Carmichael's lecture was aimed squarely at the approaching review of the colonial educational system, with a call for the adoption of the National School, i.e. the public school, model. Carmichael gave a second lecture at the School of Arts on 'Political Economy' before returning to his Hunter Valley property. He was soon back in Sydney, having been requested to present expert evidence at the Governor's select committee on the future of education in the Colony.

Returning full-time to his Hunter Valley vineyard, in October 1844, Carmichael opened a new academy, which following the Fellenberg system, trained young men in the practical skills of agriculture in the context of a more academic and general education. Carmichael's aspirations for involvement in the wider education sphere continued into his later years. In 1849, while still operating his agricultural academy, he applied to the Board of National Education for appointment as General Superintendent of National Schools in NSW. He was told that no such appointment was to be considered at that time (Turney, 1969).

Carmichael later offered his services in 1854, to help with the writing of a curriculum and to train schoolmasters for the new National or public schools. During this period he continued to promote education locally in the Hunter Valley. He was instrumental in the establishment of a National (i.e. Public) School at Seaham in 1849, and took an active role in adult education, often speaking, at the Maitland Mechanics' Institute through the 1850s, and returning to his beloved SMSA to present major addresses on questions of educational import (Turney, 1969).

In 1860, his old University, St Andrews's, awarded him a doctorate (*LL.D honoris causa*) in recognition of his most significant contribution to education in the colony of NSW. Carmichael decided to return to England on a private visit, and a farewell dinner was held at Clarence Town in May 1862. On June 28, 1862, Carmichael died at sea, aboard the ship *Light of the Age*, a very apt name considering Carmichael's life's work in education (Dunn, 2011). To Carmichael education was the great moral panacea, by which all mankind's affections, social and moral, could be developed. The cultivation of the intellectual and hence the moral faculties would aid the true understanding of any

question, and thus foster true morality rather than narrow sectarian opinions (Nadel, 1966).

An advocate always ready to articulate a philosophical defense of the value of education, Henry Carmichael was a liberal and progressive thinker in politics, and a tireless champion of the twin causes of adult education and public schooling. His views on education were always strongly anti-sectarian and inclusive. Moreover, he was a competent and conscientious public servant, who as the government surveyor for the Hunter Valley region did much to promote local development. Finally, he was an important pioneer of the great Australian wine industry.

References

- Baker, D. W. A. (1967). Lang, John Dunmore (1799–1878). In *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. Retrieved from <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lang-john-dunmore-2326/text2953>
- Carmichael, H. (1844). Introductory Lecture delivered at the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, June 3.
- Crew, V. (1970). Henry Carmichael. *Australian Journal of Adult Education*, 10(1), 20–24.
- Driscoll, W. P. (1969). The beginning of the wine industry in the Hunter Valley. *History Monograph No. 5*. Newcastle, NSW: Newcastle Public Library. Retrieved from <http://www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/Newcastle/media/Local-Studies-images/Local-Studies-documents/The-Beginnings-of-the-Wine-Industry-in-the-Hunter-Valley-edit-2.pdf>
- Dunn, M. (2011). Carmichael, Henry. In *Dictionary of Sydney*. Retrieved from http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/carmichael_henry
- King, H. (1966). Bourke, Sir Richard (1777–1855). In *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 1. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. Retrieved from <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bourke-sir-richard-1806/text2055>
- The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*. (1844). July 13, p. 1.
- Morris, R. K. (2008). *Henry Carmichael*. An Address to the Annual General Meeting of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts on the Occasion of the School's 175th Birthday, March 22, 2008.
- Nadel, G. (1966). Carmichael, Henry (1796–1862). In *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 1. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. Retrieved from <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/carmichael-henry-1881>
- The Sydney Herald* (1833). March 21.
- The Sydney Morning Herald* (1849). December 6.
- Turney, C. (Ed.). (1969). *Pioneers of Australian education*. Sydney, Australia: Sydney University Press.