



Longbridge Deverill School, now the village Hall.
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Nonconformist Attacks on Church Schools – The Vicar Replies

The Attacks on Church Schools A reply to Mr. S. Smith, M.P.

The Rev. R. G. Penny, vicar of Longbridge Deverill, Warminster, sends us copy of correspondence he has had with Mr. S. Smith, M.P., in reference to an attack which the hon. member made on Church schools. On June 24 Mr. Smith, in a speech in the House of Commons on the Education Act, cited the following as an example of clerical intolerance;

“Longbridge Deverill, Wilts.

A man and his wife came to work for a local farmer, and attended the Primitive Methodist Chapel. The children attended the Church of England school, the only one available. They claimed the Conscience Clause, to the astonishment of the teachers and managers. At the end of the school year the eldest boy obtained one of the vicar’s prizes (which was a prayer book). On Saints’ days the school was closed, and the children were taken to school, but this boy was set to work to clean out the school offices, &c. This is the spirit shown in that village and in many others in Wiltshire today, where priests are members of the English Church Union and other such societies.” Mr. Penny had this extract brought to his attention on the 1st of August, and the next day he wrote to the member for Flintshire, observing in the course of his letter:

“As this extract contains serious misrepresentations, and you have made an unworthy reflection on me, I have a right to ask you for the sources of your information, for it is evident that you have been betrayed into accepting as true a gross perversion of facts, and thereby have committed a grave injustice, which I have no doubt you will hasten to repair. In order that you may know the real facts of the case, I will take the various points *seriatim*. The allusion can only be to a boy named Albert Pike, who entered the school in the year 1898, as no other child has ever been withdrawn from religious instruction during the time I have been vicar of this parish. To whom is reference made when it was stated that they claimed the Conscience Clause? The parents never claimed it, nor did the children, with the exception of this one boy, who asked to be excused from instruction in the Prayer-book only, a request which was at once granted. No astonishment was shown, and no remarks were made either by teachers or managers. In fact, the other four managers never even knew that the child had been exempt from any part of the religious instruction for the school. It is not true that the school was closed on Saints’ days. It never is and never has been. The elder scholars certainly attend a twenty minutes service on Saints’ days, in place of the ordinary religious instruction; but any children would be excused such attendance if the parents desired it. It is not true that the boy obtained one of the vicar’s prizes (which was a prayer book).

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The boy in question never gained a prize at all, and if he had, would most certainly not have had a Prayer-book given to him. If the boy was set to work to clean the school offices, he simply did so in his turn. This work is always done by the children, and I most emphatically deny the insinuation that an undue share of it fell to the boy in question. I must now request you, as a public man, and a man of honour, to withdraw the statements you have made. This is not a question of Protestantism versus Catholicism, but of falsehood versus truth. Without sifting your evidence, or making any inquiry of the person at whom this cowardly attack is aimed, you have recklessly quoted a series of misstatements, in order to poison the minds of the people against a section of the clergy with whom you happen to disagree. If this end can only be gained by such means, we need have no fear for the result. In common fairness, therefore, I must ask you to send me an apology for the wrong you have done to me, and the error into which you have been misled. Of that apology, and my own letter, I claim the right to make any public use I may deem expedient, as the accusation was a public one, and has already had the widest circulation."

Mr. Smith, in the course of his reply, dated August 3, said: "I may say that I had a large number of such cases from all parts of England, and that it was only possible to quote a few specimens. You will understand that it was not feasible to investigate each cause in detail, but I gave the name of my informant in nearly every case, though not, I believe, in yours. I may add that no other case adduced by me has been challenged. I shall, of course, communicate with my informant in this case, and, if he is unable to substantiate his statements with regard to it, I shall authorise you to contradict the reference I made unwittingly in Parliament, and express my sincere regret."

Writing again, on August 25, Mr. Smith remarked, "I have received the results of the investigation made into the case you brought before me. My informant was the Rev. J. Hirst Hollowell, of Rochdale, secretary to the Northern Counties Education League. I enclose you an extract of the letter I have received from him, and it seems to substantially bear out the statement I made in Parliament."

In the extract named, Mr. Hollowell, while maintaining that his information was "generally" correct, admitted that the boy did not gain a prize at all at Longbridge School, and modified his statement with regard to the school being closed on Saint's days. Mr. Penny then laid the whole matter before the schoolmistress, who corroborated his statements in answer to Mr. Smith's charges, and said that, although she received a verbal request that the elder boy might be excused from Prayer-book instruction, she never received any instructions with respect to the other children of the family. She added that she "never heard and comment passed by the vicar on the boy's exemption," and continued, "I most emphatically deny that he did more than his share" in the matter of the cleaning of the offices, which merely consisted in throwing water down the drain. Mr. Penny adds: "It is clear to me that both he and Mr. Hollowell, in this case, at any rate, have been imposed upon. But I have received hitherto no expression of regret from Mr. Smith, and no apology for the inaccuracy of his charges. Hence, I think it necessary to defend myself in your columns, in the interests of Churchmen generally, since a "conscience," however tender, is not the exclusive possession of Nonconformists; and I would couple it with a recommendation to Messrs. Smith and Hollowell that when they desire to give their imaginative faculties free play, they should refrain from such unjustifiable allegations against the Managers of Church Schools."

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