

*The Sunday School movement in Britain, 1900–1939.* By Caitriona McCartney. (Studies in Modern British Religious History, 46.) Pp. xvi + 210 incl. 10 graphs and 3 tables. Woodbridge–Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2023. £80. 978 1 78327 765 0

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Reading Caitriona McCartney's recent monograph on the early twentieth-century Sunday School led me to reflect on my own childhood (as I rather expect it might prompt others to do). I considered how unusual my experience of weekly Bible classes (often covered in a combination of glue and glitter) would be in twentieth-first-century Britain. Today, churches not only experience unremitting decline in regular attendees, but fewer are able either to support a Sunday School or to find any children in their increasingly grey-haired congregations to fill it. Not so, argues McCartney, a century ago when the Sunday School was not just an institution that a large majority of children came into contact with, but was a ubiquitous feature of British culture and society. It enjoyed widespread support from the great and the good while simultaneously providing opportunities for social mobility among the working classes. The book makes the big claim that 'to understand the religious world of Britain in the twentieth century we must appreciate the role Sunday schools played within it' (p. 1). The Sunday School formed a connecting thread through twentieth-century British society and represented an experience held in common that crossed boundaries of class, region and denomination. It is therefore striking that it has rarely been approached as a subject of study in its own right. It is Thomas Laqueur's work which has done more than any other to make Sunday Schools the subject of serious historical consideration. This present work though adds little to the criticisms of Malcolm Dick and Keith Snell of Laqueur's argument about their principally working-class nature. Instead, it opens up a new frontier well beyond the 1850 stopping point that Laqueur adopted. Indeed, what McCartney principally contributes to our understanding of the schools is to challenge the notion that it was the First World War which brought about the beginning of their end. Furthermore, her work is valuable in devoting considerable focus to the schools in and of themselves rather than using them simply as a weapon in the broader war of secularisation theories. She effectively balances the need to situate their gradual (though non-linear) decline from about 1910 with their continued importance to a wide section of society. The result is a refreshing analysis which takes seriously the voices of teachers and scholars for whom Sunday Schools had great importance throughout their lives. This helps us to extricate the schools from the negativity that senior churchmen often exhibited on the question of their effectiveness at the time, which in turn has often led historians to discount their crucial place in the history not only of modern British Christianity but of British society more generally.

The chapters begin with a chronological survey before latterly moving to a thematic approach. The first chapter sets the scene, demonstrating the influence of the schools before 1914, charting the increase in support that they received from Churches, and considering how their ubiquity translated into both a cultural capital and a strong bond of identity for many graduates, including politicians like David Lloyd George and Arthur Henderson. An interesting idea here is that the

schools helped to create a 'communal piety' within urban settings (p. 30). Was this piety an aspect of the much-discussed 'discursive Christianity' of the time or something unique; a religiosity that though given form through the institution of the Sunday School, was still felt and articulated distinct from the institution of the Church itself? Chapter ii considers the experiences of the schools during the First World War. It traces the efforts made by teachers and scholars to provide both practical and spiritual support to those both at home and abroad. The difficulties for the schools during wartime and the 1918 influenza outbreak are not brushed over as attendance figures were depleted and venues often repurposed. None the less, it is suggested that the schools broadly adapted to these challenges and adopted a 'business as usual' mentality which paid considerable emotional dividends. Continuing this narrative, and partly rehashing it, chapter iii turns our attention to the relationship Sunday Schools forged with soldiers fighting on the front. Effectively contributing to a growing historiography that seeks to challenge the notion of the irreligious Tommy, this is of value in pointing to the after-life of the schools which often remained in contact with their serving graduates, providing them with a link to home and a reminder of what they had been taught. Moreover, McCartney rejects the idea that the average soldier was ignorant of the Bible and lacking in religious seriousness on account of ineffective Sunday School instruction. As Callum Brown and Bill Jacob have effectively done, this chapter takes the pessimism of senior church voices with a pinch of salt and sets it within a broader context of less exalted lay voices whose assessment is found to be rather more positive.

The spectre of war looms large in the fourth chapter which charts the route the schools navigated through the choppy waters of the post-war years. However, continuing the reassessment of the schools' decline, the war is not seen as pivotal as close attention to the statistics shows the picture to be far more nuanced. Indeed, given the challenges of the post-war world the chapter concludes quite conversely that the schools achieved considerable success in seeing growth in 1918–19 and relative stability during the 1920s. However, though useful in displaying the role the schools played in facilitating remembrance and enabling the rehabilitation of soldiers into their communities, the chapter perhaps fails to deliver quite what it promises. It reads more as a reflection on the legacy of the war than an analysis focused on the inter-war period itself. For example, discussion of the 1930s (as elsewhere in the book) is limited and the claim that decline was faster in the 1930s than in the 1920s receives no further substantiation. Throughout the book the considerable attention given to the First World War, though a crucial event within the timeframe under discussion, does somewhat leave the reader with a desire to know more about the latter half of the period. However, chapters v and vi help towards remedying this, focusing respectively on the reform of the schools and on their international connections. Chapter v is illuminating in drawing upon the influence of developments in both secular education and education theory, to consider how Sunday Schools made changes to their teaching methods, instituted training colleges and attained a hitherto unacknowledged level of professionalisation. The final chapter transports us around the full scope of the schools' international reach, situating the role of British schools within the international movement while pointing to the crucial

importance of the schools in both stimulating interest in, and providing support for, missionary work.

The sum of this endeavour is a study that is detailed and rich in primary evidence, effective in providing the broad geographical coverage it promises, and very clearly argued (especially in the useful, if at times formulaic, chapter conclusions). The exhaustive list of primary sources, drawn from parish and national records, is impressive. It points to the fact that much work remains yet to be done fully to account for the role of the wider parochial apparatus in shaping the society and political culture around it. Far from being a straightforward contribution to the historiography of Sunday Schools, this work issues a challenge not only to historians of modern British Christianity but to any historian considering the experience of British life and society in the last century. With nearly 7.5 million children having attended Sunday School in 1919, this was an institution that played an outsized role in the lives of those who lived in Britain well into the twentieth century (and perhaps beyond). Listing Roy Hattersley, Patricia Routledge, Ewan McGregor and Melvyn Bragg as just some of the notable people in public life who have spoken about the influence of Sunday School on their development, we come to realise just quite how important these schools were and how historians have for too long failed to realise this. Furthermore, such work is helpful in adding meat to the bone of the 'discursive Christianity' of Callum Brown whose concept can sometimes appear rather shallow. However, to have fully engaged with his work, one might have liked to see in the conclusion an extension of the story of the schools into the 1960s and beyond fully to substantiate the argument for the ongoing influence that is implied. None the less, instead of joining in with the chorus of voices singing from the hymn sheet of religious decline, this useful book throws down the gauntlet to those who would assume that religion became progressively less important. Rather, Sunday Schools, perhaps uniquely, enable us to recognise why it is that British Christianity is yet to breathe its last even though it has received pre-emptive eulogies in each generation since 1945.

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