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A ‘Transcript of Their Mind’?: Ragged School Literacy in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

This article explores the education ragged schools imparted in the mid-nineteenth century. It argues that the ragged school movement filled an important need within communities, teaching reading and writing to those children excluded from existing institutions by their poverty. Until now, scholarship on the education offered in ragged schools has focused on the assessment of government inspectors or the movement's own literature. Using a collection of 227 letters ragged school emigrants sent their former teacher, this article shifts attention towards the children's own words and penmanship. It demonstrates the widely varying abilities found within one classroom, contrasting those who required amanuenses with those who composed poetry. This article offers new and valuable insights into the literacy attained by the poorest children in Victorian society, as well as their individual efforts to improve. The letters evidence the value placed on literacy and reveal the time former ragged school scholars invested in cultivating their reading and writing skills. It suggests both pride and shame could be attached to literacy, with letter composition evoking anxiety for some. More broadly, this article presents a new view of working-class education by revealing young men's immediate attitudes towards literacy that are inaccessible through autobiographies or memoirs.

Keywords

Emigration, literacy, education, poverty, letters, emotion, Britain

List of Abbreviations

LRSU – London Ragged School Union

OCM – Our Children's Magazine

RSUM – Ragged School Union Magazine

SHC – Surrey History Centre

A 'Transcript of Their Mind'?: Ragged School Literacy in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

Introduction

In August 1867 the editors of the *Our Children's Magazine* (*OCM*), a publication intended for the impoverished children attending ragged schools, told their young audience that they 'hope[d] that whatever pen our readers may use they will aim to write neatly and legibly'.[1] Just one month earlier, Martin Ware, both a barrister and the boys' superintendent at Compton Place ragged school, left his position after approximately twenty years of service. Upon leaving the institution, he took a cache of school journals, letters, and papers, which were later stored within his family archive in the Surrey History Centre. These are the only surviving documents from Compton Place; by taking them Ware ensured their preservation. Of particular relevance here are the 227 letters that Ware received from 57 former ragged school scholars. A number of those who wrote to Ware were also mentioned in the school journals that he maintained over seventeen years, making it possible to piece together the educational trajectory of individual scholars. Ware's habitual references to the receipt of letters in journal entries indicate that the preserved collection is, for the most part, complete. Both his journals and his memoirs do not expand upon his reasons for preserving the letters; however, he likewise preserved letters from his 'dear Mamma' and 'dear Father', suggesting a sentimental attachment to the correspondence. Because of the London Ragged School Union's (LRSU) Emigration Fund that enabled former scholars to seek their fortunes across the British Empire, Ware received letters from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The three or four pages composed in hammocks, servant's quarters, and at campsites, give unique access to the boys' own testimonies, composed in their own hand. Consequently, the letters allow an unprecedented glimpse into the writing habits of the most destitute individuals in

[1] 'About Writing Materials', *OCM* (August 1867), p. 119. This work was supported by the University of Edinburgh's Principal Career Development Scholarship and travel grants from Edinburgh University's School of Divinity and School of History, Classics and Archaeology.

Victorian society. At its simplest level, this article explores the literacy attained in a ragged school classroom. In analysing the letters composed by former scholars, it opens up new understanding of the education possible within the ragged school system. Using the letters of former scholars, it reconstructs the meaning that their authors attributed to reading and writing. Just as Helen Rogers has drawn attention to the desire of young prisoners for books and their 'pleasure in hearing stories', this article demonstrates the value that former ragged school scholars placed on newspapers, books, and letters as well as the effort they invested in learning to read and write.[2] The letters analysed here give insight into the emotional lives of poor emigrants in the nineteenth century, revealing both the anxiety and the pride that was attached to literacy. Furthermore, the letters testify to the significant and affective relationships that could be formed within ragged school classrooms and later maintained over letter. More widely, this article provides a significant contribution to understanding of working-class education. In focusing on the letters the young men wrote shortly after leaving Compton Place, rather than autobiographical accounts or memoirs, it is possible to access their 'in the moment' attitudes towards learning and literacy. While autobiographies and memoirs represent the mature expression of literacy, the letters Ware received enrich our understanding of the process by which literacy was acquired and give insight into the emotional and practical efforts that underpinned learning.

1. Schooling in the Early Nineteenth Century

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the educational scene in Britain was complex. Demand for public schools for the middle and upper classes was increasing, while Anglican Church schools offered an affordable alternative for England's respectable working class. Church schools grew in prominence in the wake of government grants after 1833, quickly dominating the educational

[2] Helen Rogers, '"Oh, What Beautiful Books!" Captivated Reading in an Early Victorian Prison', *Victorian Studies* 55:1 (Autumn 2012), pp. 57-84, p. 59.

scene.[3] They were not, however, uncontested. According to Eric J. Evans the evangelical revival towards the end of the eighteenth century resulted in a 'bewildering variety' of religious schools in England and Wales, while W. B. Stephens comments on the extensive impact rivalry between denominations had on schooling.[4] Dame schools, often taught by older women in their homes, provided a cheaper alternative to those families unable to afford church school rates. Evans's estimation that these institutions were 'educationally worthless', has been contested by Phil Gardner, who argues that they offered a progressive form of teaching that working-class parents were willing to pay a small fee for.[5] It should be noted, however, that even dame schools were beyond the means of the poor families targeted by ragged schools. Sunday schools were the final major contributor to the nation's education system. From their modest beginnings in the efforts of Hannah Ball in High Wycombe and Robert Raikes in Gloucester, Sunday schools numbered approximately 2,000 by 1800.[6] In Thomas Laqueur's words, their sudden growth 'surprised even their most sanguine supporters'.[7]

Church schools were wide-ranging in the education granted, with some teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic and others not teaching reading at all and instead focusing on industrial skills.[8] Conversely, all Sunday schools taught reading as it was regarded as a crucial component of learning Scripture.[9] They were, according to Michael Sanderson, a core contributor to rising literacy levels at the close of the eighteenth century.[10] Similarly, John Burnett comments that Sunday schools brought 'educational opportunities of a kind to millions who had to work on six days of

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3 Michael Sanderson, *Education, Economic Change and Society in England 1780-1870* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 21.
4 Eric J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain 1783-1870* (Essex: Pearson Education, 2001) p. 290, W. B. Stephens, *Education in Britain 1750-1914* (London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1998), p. 13.
5 Evans, p. 290, Phil Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).
6 Evans, p. 68.
7 Thomas Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture 1780-1850* (London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 42.
8 Evans, p. 290.
9 Laqueur, p. 111.
10 Sanderson, p. 13.

the week'.[11] As Laqueur notes, it was felt that the 'labouring classes should learn to read so that they might read their Bible, fill up their leisure time more constructively, and thereby keep out of mischief'.[12] It is therefore unsurprising that some Sunday school supporters deemed writing 'irrelevant'.[13] Education was, by the mid-nineteenth century, considered the hallmark of civilised society. Literacy, in David Vincent's words, 'became a consequence, a cause, a guarantor, and eventually the very epitome of progress'.[14] Although there was a general acknowledgement that poor children should receive some education, how far this should go remained contentious. Evans comments on the role class anxieties played in extending education to the poor, noting that it 'is no accident that factory reform and educational provision were so often linked'. By gathering masses of labourers in close, confined spaces 'in monstrously multiplying towns', it was feared that immorality would likewise multiply.[15] Concerns regarding writing in particular have been thoroughly documented by historians of education.[16] Evans notes that writing was considered a 'dangerous skill' by those who felt 'the precipice separating the opposed disasters of untamed, brute ignorance and a discontented class with inflated expectations born of inappropriately extensive education was desperately narrow'.[17] The freedom that writing facilitated could be either a blessing or a curse; it could lead to both stable employment or the articulation and dissemination of undesirable ideas. Nevertheless, historians of education concur in noting the difficulties faced when trying to gauge the reading and writing skills of the British population in the nineteenth century.[18] As the rich variety of schools in existence held to no one educational standard, the picture of literacy during this period is multifarious and complex. Historians have demonstrated that

[11] John Burnett, *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education, and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (Suffolk: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 140.
[12] Laqueur, p. 126
[13] Ibid., p. 127.
[14] David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 2.
[15] Ibid., p. 290.
[16] Ibid., p. 69, Laqueur, pp. 124-146, Sanderson, pp. 19-20.
[17] Evans, p. 69.
[18] Sanderson, pp. 9-18, Stephens, pp. 21-39.

working-class families and individuals sought out education. Burnett, Laqueur, Jonathan Rose, and Vincent have gathered considerable evidence to suggest a demand for schooling from within working-class communities.[19] In *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, Vincent argues that the manner in which small household libraries were passed down through generations 'suggests that the working class community in general, and not just committed readers, had always possessed a certain reverence for the written word'.[20] Rogers's research on the Everyday Book of Sarah Martin, a mid-nineteenth-century prison visitor to the House of Correction at Great Yarmouth, is especially relevant here. Martin's entries suggest the boys she engaged with enjoyed reading; her descriptions show them 'clamouring for books and arguing over the connection between the stories and their lives'.[21] Reading could be a source of pleasure for the poor as well as the comfortable. The 'continual and inescapable' desire many working-class individuals had for literature is demonstrated by the vast expansion in affordable books, newspapers, and magazines during the nineteenth century.[22] Nevertheless, society's most destitute children were precluded from the existing schools. Cunningham estimates that for 'some 20 per cent of the population, payment of fees was out of the question', effectively eliminating Church and dame schools.[23] Although Sunday schools were free, they could turn away children whose challenging behaviour or dirty appearance was regarded as dangerous or disruptive. On this note, Burnett observes in his study of working-class autobiographies that 'social distinctions and snobbery were not absent in Sunday School' and concludes that the poorest children were excluded by their 'lack of suitable clothes, shoes or the "collection" penny'.[24] It was for these children that the ragged schools intended to cater.

[19] Burnett, pp. 138-139, Laqueur, p. 148, Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the Working Classes* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiography* (London: Methuen, 1982).
[20] Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 111.
[21] Rogers, p. 57.
[22] Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 112.
[23] Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1995), p. 103.
[24] Burnett, p. 143.

2. The Ragged School Movement

Ragged schools emerged across Britain in the mid-nineteenth century in tandem with the rapid expansion of industrial towns and increasingly visible child poverty. In April 1844 the LRSU was formed to oversee the work of ragged schools in the metropolis. At its second annual meeting in July 1846 the LRSU oversaw twenty-six schools, attended by 2600 children and 250 teachers.[25] Four years later these figures had risen to ninety-four schools, overseen by 1350 volunteer teachers and 156 paid.[26] By 1860 the LRSU recorded overseeing 560 schools attended by 49,290 scholars.[27] The most successful institutions, such as Field Lane in Clerkenwell, London, provided a multitude of local services. Mother's meetings, so-called 'ragged churches', nurseries, penny banks, drum and fife bands, soup kitchens, and lending-libraries were all popular initiatives. Tellingly, the *RSUM* featured a letter in May 1861 that proclaimed 'the machinery of Ragged Schools will not be perfect until School Libraries for home reading are provided'. The letter-writer, known only as 'A. B. C.', argued that the provision of wholesome, Biblical literature through lending-libraries would protect young and malleable minds from Satan's 'ready and cheap supply' of corrupt and debased material.[28] Notwithstanding the anxieties surrounding writing that Evans, Laqueur, and Sanderson reference, ragged school children were encouraged to master penmanship. It was of practical use for ragged school children to be competent writers. When the LRSU established a rag-collecting brigade in 1862, scholars were informed that those wishing to be employed 'must be able to read and write, and keep account of the moneys entrusted to them'.[29] Moreover, literacy was of critical import for emigrants. Included

[25] 'The Ragged School Union', *Derby Mercury*, 17 July 1846.
[26] 'Brief Abstract of the Sixth Annual Report of the Ragged School Union', *RSUM* (June 1850), p. 155.
[27] 'Ragged School Union', *The Times*, 8 May 1860.
[28] 'Correspondence: Ragged School Libraries', *RSUM* (May 1861), p. 117.
[29] 'The Rag-Collecting Brigade', *OCM* (February 1862), p. 25.

among the 'Conditions Required of Every Candidate for Emigration' listed in an 1849 LRSU pamphlet were 'The ability to write a single sentence from dictation' and to 'read fluently'.[30] The LRSU's emphasis on emigrants being sufficiently literate had a threefold purpose. A reasonable level of competency in reading and writing would assist emigrants in obtaining good employment, enable them to study Scripture, and allow them to maintain contact with their homeland. Yet, as shown in this article, ragged school emigrants varied considerably in this regard.

Advice issued to ragged school teachers is helpful in ascertaining the value placed on writing. In 1859 the *RSUM* advised teachers 'See to it that your pupils are good writers; make this matter your special concern', adding 'teach your scholars that their handwriting expresses their thoughts, and is regarded as the transcript of their mind'.[31] In the same year the *OCM* sought to inspire its young audience to write, asking its readers:

> Why should some of you boys, by industry and perseverance, not become good writers, and so get a good living by writing books. Let some of you try, and I promise, if you send me anything good, I will have it printed and published for you very soon.[32]

This extract from the *OCM* is particularly noteworthy, demonstrating the important role the publication played in encouraging its readers to persevere with their lessons. It illustrates that the movement did not seek to restrict the children's writing to practical tasks such as composing correspondence; rather, the *OCM* sought to facilitate imaginative writing. At least in this instance, children were encouraged to articulate their thoughts by writing stories.

Despite the LRSU's professed intent to teach poor children to both read and write, little has been written on this subject. The traditional sources used to examine literacy levels, such as marriage registers or prison records, do not give access to the reading and writing abilities of those attending ragged schools. Certainly, these sources do not enable historians to evaluate the effectiveness of ragged schools in particular. Much of what has been written by historians regarding

[30] *Letters from Ragged School Emigrants* (London: Blackburn & Burt, 1848), p. 4.
[31] 'Self-Education', *RSUM* (1859), p. 200.
[32] 'Queen Anne of England', *OCM* (March 1859), p. 40.

the literacy of ragged school scholars is presumptive, and often tenuous. Using data on the employment of former ragged school children, Derek Webster argues that as 'the majority took labouring positions' the 'inference must be that the standards were poor'.[33] He concludes simply that 'academic distinction was not the prime aim'.[34] E. A. G. Clark's unpublished Master's thesis on the London ragged schools touches briefly on the subject, with Clark writing that the 'primacy of the religious and social aims was reflected in the curriculum, methods and achievements of the schools'.[35] In Clark's own admission, his conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the education offered are limited by his sources. Drawing predominantly on the reports from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of schools prior to the Education Acts, Clark writes that it was 'natural that the inspectors should be more specific about the inefficient schools' and observes that a 'biased case could be made against the ragged schools by quoting the most scathing of their judgements'.[36]

Roger Swift's chapter on the Chester Ragged School Society provides the most thorough discussion of the literacy reached in the schools. Drawing on the assessments of educational attainment found in the Society's annual reports and school committee minutes, Swift is alert to the 'rosy', and 'often self-congratulatory' nature of such material.[37] Although the categories employed – such as '"could not read at all"' and '"could read a little"' – are 'somewhat crude', Swift observes that they nevertheless 'provide some measure of the extent to which the Society achieved its educational aims'.[38] Nevertheless, Swift's conclusions regarding the children's abilities are limited by the subjective – and often vague – assessments of inspectors and teachers. Institutional documents, such as those consulted by Webster, Clark and Swift, restrict the analysis to adult voices.

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33 Derek Webster, 'The Ragged School Movement and the Education of the Poor in the Nineteenth Century' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 1973), pp. 50-51.
34 Ibid., p. 51.
35 E. A. G. Clark, 'The Ragged School Union and the Education of the London Poor in the Nineteenth Century' (unpublished Master's thesis, University of London, 1967), p. 151.
36 Clark, p.154.
37 Roger Swift, 'Philanthropy and the Children of the Streets: The Chester Ragged School Society, 1851-1870' in *Victorian Chester: Essays in Social History, 1830-1900*, ed. by Roger Swift, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996) pp. 149-183, p. 170. See also Wendy Prahms, *Newcastle Ragged and Industrial School* (Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2006).
38 Ibid., p. 172.

Rose critiques accounts of late nineteenth-century education that rely upon the findings of school inspectors, writing 'If we want to discover how late Victorian and Edwardian working-class children actually experienced school, we must consult them directly'.[39] As such, Rose draws upon a vast body of oral testimonies and autobiographies. The centrality of school reports and inspectorate assessments in the existing scholarship on ragged school literacy is undoubtedly related to the fact that documents from former scholars have not been identified by historians until now. Unsurprisingly, and quite rightly, the letters from emigrants published in promotional pamphlets and magazines have been treated with suspicion by historians. Wagner references the emigrant letters the *RSUM* featured, observing that they functioned to 'keep public interest in the scheme alive' and to demonstrate that 'the colonies had a great deal to offer', while Swain and Hillel note that 'child rescue' publications used 'emigrant letters, suitably edited, as testimonials to the importance of their work'.[40] Webster likewise comments on the function these letters played in ragged school promotional literature, noting that they were 'part of the early mythology of the movement'.[41] The problem inauthentic letters pose is stressed by Gerber, who argues that many were fraudulently composed either in support of or in opposition to emigration. Even in those cases where genuine letters were used, Gerber argues that it was not unusual for an editor to have 'radically trimmed his evidence'.[42] By transcribing the actual letters former ragged school scholars composed rather than those selectively published in ragged school literature, it is possible to avoid the problems Gerber has identified with regard to authenticity. Unlike the letters featured in the *RSUM*, the correspondence analysed here retains the original spelling mistakes, crossings-out, and smudges that were present when Ware received them. Such seemingly insignificant details were eliminated in the emigrant letters

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[39] Rose, p. 146.
[40] Gillian Wagner, *Children of the Empire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1982), p. 32, Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire: Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 161.
[41] Webster, p. 213.
[42] David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008), p. 10.

read aloud at LRSU meetings or printed in a polished and corrected format within promotional literature. The misspellings and clarifications in the letters of former scholars help to build a more intricate picture of their authors and their abilities. Moreover, the correspondence Ware received provides rare access to the immediate attitudes of young, working-class men towards learning and literacy, inaccessible through the autobiographies or oral testimonies used by Rose and Vincent.

Because of the large number of correspondents, the letters preserved give an indication of the range of literacy of ragged school scholars. It should be noted that children attended the school for different lengths of time with varying levels of commitment and diverse intellectual abilities, and consequently the letters former scholars composed showcase a broad range of competency. Nevertheless, the typicality of the letters remains problematic. It is difficult to determine with any certainty whether Ware was an exceptional, an average, or an inept teacher. Similarly, it is impossible to ascertain whether factors beyond incompetent teaching, such as ill health, disability, or indifference are to blame for poor literacy. At the same time, the value of this source base lies in the fact that it represents the fragmented and, until this point, unheard testimonies of a cohort of ragged school children.

3. Absence and Anxiety

One of the most notable limitations of this collection is that it is only possible for letters to survive if a former scholar wrote. By not writing, for whatever reason, many Compton Place boys can only be found in the documents produced by Ware himself. It is safe to assume that some former scholars did not wish to retain contact with Ware or the school, regardless of their writing ability. It may not be coincidental that no letters are preserved from young Charles King, who Ware held responsible for setting the school on fire in March 1856.[43] It is equally likely that poor literacy prevented some boys from writing at all – it is worth noting that the letters of a handful of former

[43] Surrey History Centre (SHC) 1585/4, Ware's Journals, 23 March 1856.

scholars evidence that they were unable to compose the letter themselves.

Amanuenses were explicitly mentioned by correspondents including J. Archer, John Crawley, John Dowie, and George Roby. The sudden change in the script of John Campbell's letters suggests that his first two letters were composed on his behalf. After informing Ware that the 'testermont' he sent had arrived safely, Crawley noted that he was unable to 'read the testermont' and therefore 'the boy that writs this reads it to me'.[44] Further, it is unsurprising that Roby required an amanuensis as Ware's journals reveal his concerns about Roby's writing while he was at the school. As noted above, the LRSU required a demonstrable level of literacy from its emigrants. In May 1857 Roby's application for emigration was 'rather a close shave as his writing was so bad'. Prior to the boy's assessment Ware had taken 'some pains to cram [him] for the occasion', observing that he and the others 'seemed to have forgotten their schooling very much'.[45] The two letters Roby sent to Ware from Ontario consist of an especially meticulous script, distinctly at odds with the 'bad' writing Ware described. The use of amanuenses presents difficulties when trying to ascertain the capabilities of former ragged school scholars. Vincent observes in relation to marriage marks that, as reading was learned before writing, a crudely signed name suggests a reasonable degree of competency in reading.[46] In a similar way, the need for an amanuensis to aid in letter composition does not have any bearing on conclusions drawn regarding reading. The use of an amanuensis does not necessarily denote an inability to write; rather, it may suggest a lack of confidence on the part of the former scholar. Those with the least proficiency in writing spelled phonetically. Writing from 'Hamelton' in June 1857, George Chapman opened his correspondence to his 'kind ser' with the standard greeting that he had taken

[44] SHC 1487/128/1, Emigrant Letters, 13 November 1860. Capitalisations, corrections, grammar, spelling, and underlining have been transcribed as closely as possible. An effort has been made to retain the author's words wherever they are discernible. For this reason, '[sic]' is not used as it can be presumed that 'errors' within quotations reflect those present in the sources.

[45] SHC 1585/5, 8 May 1857.

[46] Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, p. 19.

the first 'opertunity of righting thes few lines oping to find you in good elth'.[47] By far the most commonly used phonetic spelling across the letters is 'ham' instead of 'am', while Chapman also used 'hus' for 'us' and 'an' in the place of 'and'. A distinctive pronunciation is likewise evident in Peter Carpenter's third letter, which reveals that he used the term 'garn' for 'going'.[48] Such pronunciation is reminiscent of the waif portraits found in the narratives of Charles Dickens and Henry Mayhew, or in *Punch*'s caricatures of 'street Arabs', suggesting they had a keen ear for the East End dialect. Although such haphazard spelling can prove challenging when transcribing letters – Ware's pencilled notes demonstrate he sometimes found it difficult to decipher words – it enables the reader to come within earshot of the author's spoken words.

Unlike wealthier emigrants, the smudged script and wandering content of the letters betrays the fact that Ware's correspondents did not compose drafts.[49] Because of this, corrections and refinements remain on the page. Although this results in a script that is harder to decipher, it has also left a greater wealth of information than pre-drafted writing could. The immediacy of the letters means they provide a rare insight into the concerns of ragged school emigrants. Edits on the page, such as crossing-outs and clarifications, hint at the thought process of the letter-writer, with amendments signifying reflection on the narrative given. Commas and full-stops rarely punctuate the letters. Murphy's second letter is composed of one long sentence that encompasses a wide range of thoughts and questions, uncomfortably strung together on a single sheet of paper. His thanks 'fore your kindness to words me' is immediately followed by a stream of thoughts and concerns. Enquiries regarding the health of teachers, friends and family members, a reference to feelings of homesickness, and a note to his 'Dear Mother' all flow into one another.[50] Charles Restieaux's

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[47] SHC 1487/124/1, 14 June 1857.

[48] SHC 1487/123/3, 12 [January ?] 1858. There are limitations to what the letters reveal about the education offered in Compton Place. Many of the spelling mistakes are also found in a letter that Ware's eldest son wrote to his mother in which he noted enjoying his time with his uncle 'verry much'. 'Verry' is a common misspelling found in the emigrant letters. SHC 1576/10/7, 13 February 1880.

[49] Gerber notes that it was the norm for those emigrants who could afford paper to write drafts of letters. Gerber, p. 177.

[50] SHC 1487/145/2, 11 June 1855.

second letter is similarly continuous, with each thought running into the next. After expressing his hope to see Ware again 'if it is the will of our heavenly father', the letter moves seamlessly to relate that 'the port were we are stoping is surowned with hills'.[51] In letters like those from Murphy and Restieaux, there appears to have been little reasoning behind the order of content; the page acted as a vehicle to transport thoughts, questions, and concerns home. Such letters were, in a very real sense, a 'transcript of their mind'.[52]

Correspondence was not wholly unstructured, however. The majority of former scholars framed their correspondence with set salutations and valedictions that, given their dominance across the collection, they likely learned at Compton Place. In his research on the letters of Irish emigrants, David Fitzpatrick stresses the ritualised nature of salutations and draws attention to the derision with which tired and over-used phrases came to be regarded.[53] Fitzpatrick's observations resonate with the Compton Place letters, as variations of the opening 'I write these few lines to you hoping to find you well as it leaves me at present' recur throughout the collection. Ragged school sources suggest that such language was commonplace in the letters of former scholars more widely. The reaction of those gathered when one such letter was read at the LRSU's annual meeting in 1849 is telling:

> "Dear mother, I write these few lines to you, hoping to find you in good health, as it leaves me at present. (much laughter.) [That's a stereotyped exordium.] I have arrived with safety in the colony, after a long and wearisome voyage".[54]

In line with Fitzpatrick's observations, some regarded such 'stereotyped' language with humour. Nevertheless, the prevalence of set phrases in the letters Ware received indicates that they lent a useful structure to inexperienced letter-writers. Pre-approved salutations and valedictions provided a helpful framework that obeyed the accepted social protocols for correspondence. The obstacle language could pose is noted by Gerber, who observes that most working-class emigrants

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[51] SHC 1487/153/2, 20 August 1857.
[52] 'Self-Education', *RSUM* (1859), p. 200.
[53] David Fitzpatrick, 'Emigrant letters: I Take up My Pen to Write These Few Lines', *History Ireland*, 2:4 (1994), pp. 15-19, p. 17.
[54] 'Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Ragged School Union', *RSUM* (June 1849), p. 107.

'had to strain against significant limitations in their use of written language'.[55] Composing a letter was a daunting task for even the most accomplished scholars; spelling, handwriting, and the articulation of complex emotions together presented a sizable challenge. Charles Henley may have been referring to any or all of the aforementioned concerns when he told Ware in his first letter that he 'could not muster sufficient courage to write'.[56] Similarly, while staying at the Curragh army base in Ireland J. Archer informed Ware that he had arranged for 'a comrade of mine to write this to you', after which he added 'you know I was no scholar'.[57] As already noted, the use of an amanuensis was not unusual. It is telling that Archer presumed his teacher would recollect his failures when learning to read and write; such shame or embarrassment associated with literacy is detectable in a large number of the letters. Not only were young men with low levels of literacy faced with the challenge of composing a letter, it was a letter addressed to the man responsible for their education whom they were at risk of disappointing. Correspondents often drew attention to their writing while providing emphatic apologies for it. After relying on an amanuensis for his first and second letters, Campbell's third letter closed by asking Ware to 'answer this letter By return of post so as to let me no if you can under stand it as I write verry ~~well~~ Bad'.[58] Further, Charles Wiles's extensive correspondence suggests he was particularly conscious of his writing and continued to be so despite writing at least fourteen letters. He asked Ware to 'exqus my writing' in his second letter and repeated the same request in his fifth, albeit spelled differently.[59] In his seventh letter he begged Ware 'please to Exques the Bad writing as I am in a hurry', after which he again beseeched him at the close of his letter 'please to Exqus me and do not be angry with me'.[60] His eighth letter contained his familiar apology, 'Sir please to Exquas this Bad writing', as did his ninth.[61] He again commented on his writing in his tenth letter, stating as

[55] Gerber, p. 1.
[56] SHC 1487/139/1, 16 October 1870.
[57] SHC 1487/119/1, 25 July 1866.
[58] SHC 1487/122/3, 9 April 1860.
[59] SHC 1487/164/2, 31 March 1861, SHC 1487/164/5, 4 July 1861.
[60] SHC 1487/164/7, 23 October 1861.
[61] SHC 1487/164/8, 21 April 1862, SHC 1487/164/9, 7 July 1862.

before 'I hope you will Exquas this Bad writing'.[62] Composed on New Year's Eve in 1863, Wiles's eleventh letter was particularly untidy. At the close of its third page he asked Ware to 'try and make all this letter out', before adding 'Belive me you shall not have one writened so bad again'.[63] Overall, nine of the fourteen letters Wiles sent included self-deprecating comments about his handwriting or spelling. Although such notes sometimes coincided with especially smudged words or crooked lines, in many instances they did not. The regularity and emphatic nature of Wiles's apologies highlight his awareness of his writing. His self-consciousness likely impacted upon the content of his letters, perhaps affecting the words chosen and the length of the correspondence.

Beyond merely mentioning their poor writing, six correspondents referenced external factors to explain their untidy script.[64] Charles Whiteman attributed his 'writting' to the fact that it was 'by fire ~~lit~~ light that I rote it', while in Gibraltar George Chapman composed his letter 'out of doors in the burning sun on a pices of stone'.[65] In his second letter from Australia John Hall explained that he had been forced to finish it hurriedly 'in the street' in order to catch the 'Read Jacket', while James Ward noted from Canada that his 'hand shake so' following a period of illness to explain his hazardous writing.[66] Charles Wiles's two brothers, George and Benjamin, were also among those who provided explanations for their writing. In 1862 George wrote 'Dear sir the pen was blunt and I could not sea so you must blame the pen and not blame me', while two years later Benjamin noted 'I hope you will exquse my Hand writing for i have only got 15 minuts to my self'.[67] These examples suggest that poor spelling or inept handwriting could be a source of shame that emigrants hoped to explain or justify.

It was not only the physical act of writing that posed a challenge to former scholars, as limitations in vocabulary, particularly in relation to emotion, also caused difficulties. The medium of letter-

[62] SHC 1487/164/10, 24 July 1863.
[63] SHC 1487/164/11, 31 December 1863.
[64] The proliferation of environmental explanations for poor handwriting is in fitting with Vincent's observations regarding the practical difficulties readers faced in working-class homes. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, pp. 120-123.
[65] SHC 1487/162/5, 12 February 1861, SHC 1487/124/12, 23 July [?].
[66] SHC 1487/134/2, 1 January 1856, SHC 1487/141/3, 12 July 1859.
[67] SHC 1487/165/2, 26 January 1862, SHC 1487/163/1, 15 January 1864.

writing meant that it was necessary to articulate sentiments that would otherwise have been conveyed through facial or physical expression. In the case of David Laing, a Scottish emigrant in Indiana, Gerber writes:

> After four sentences on his marriage, he excused himself and could say only that, if they were somehow to have the chance to talk, he could tell her more. Writing of his losses in the solitary setting of a room in a stranger's home, where he was alone with his memories and grief, proved emotionally unbearable, and, as was the case with many immigrants unaccustomed to writing, a most severe test of his ability to control language.[68]

Similar frustrations are evident in the letters Ware received. In the fifth letter he sent from New Zealand, Charles's brother, Robert Restieaux, attempted to describe his happiness at receiving correspondence, writing 'But we like to hear from old and Tried friends at home What Magic there is in that small word of course you understand all about that so i shall not try Poetry'.[69]

Unlike Robert, Frederick Henderson did 'try Poetry', sending Ware a six stanza poem about his experiences of emigration. The second stanza reads:

Ah! Why did I leave thee,
The thought oft does grieve me,
To wander afar
O'er the dark rolling sea?
But glad to return,
O do not refuse me,
The tear drop will start when I gaze upon thee.[70]

The poem testifies to Henderson's wide vocabulary and his skill in conveying imagery to his reader. Henderson was one of the few correspondents who utilised commas and full-stops, and spelling mistakes appear rarely in his letters. Yet, even he found himself restricted by words. In his seventh letter Henderson expressed his frustrations to Ware and indicated that his correspondence was limited by his inability to transport his feelings to the page. At the close of the letter he wrote 'I really dont know where I should find words to express my feelings: but I will see what I can do, for next time'.[71] Both correspondents mentioned here were able scholars; the absence of phonetic

[68] Gerber, p. 61.
[69] SHC 1487/156/5, undated.
[70] SHC 1487/138/5, undated.
[71] SHC 1487/138/7, 24 April 1866.

spelling within their letters is striking in comparison to those of others. Nevertheless, articulating emotions and concerns patently remained difficult.

4. Efforts to Improve

Ware often sent British newspapers in the place of or in addition to a letter; the correspondence he received suggests newspapers brought comfort to their recipients. Carpenter informed Ware that he was 'thankful' for the newspaper he had sent and had 'read it through 2 or 3 times'. His post-script politely suggested that he would be grateful for more newspapers in the future, as he noted 'P.S. News comes in handy at sea'.[72] When thanking Ware for 'them papers' Benjamin Elliot also articulated his appreciation for the escape they provided, writing 'they pass away many unhappy hours'.[73] Likewise, when Thomas Jones requested an *Illustrated London News* he added 'I find much pleasure in reading some home stories'.[74] It is noteworthy that the newspapers named by correspondents were the *Illustrated London News* and the *British Workman*, both of which contained illustrations.

Although not mentioned as frequently across the correspondence as newspapers, a number of letters reference books and tracts. In the same way that they received reading material from Ware while at Compton Place, former scholars later received books from their teacher through the mail. The letters show that former scholars requested and pursued reading material from Ware. When on board the H. M. S. *Donegal* John Crawley asked Ware to 'send me one of your hymn Books', explaining 'i should like one of them'.[75] Similarly, Henry Fenn wrote in 1857 'you would oblige me very much by sending me som books to pass the time' and Edward Connor noted from Bombay the following year that he 'should like to have some books out here but I cant get any'.[76]

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[72] SHC 1487/123/2, [?] May 1857.
[73] SHC 1487/131/1, 12 January 1862.
[74] SHC 1487/142/2, 20 July 1857.
[75] SHC 1487/128/2, 17 March 1861.
[76] SHC 1487/153/2, 20 August 1857, SHC 1487/126/1, 23 March 1858.

Writing from New Zealand in August 1857, Charles Restieaux penned: 'Mr Ware i shall be obliged to you if you can send me some books'.[77] Reflecting Vincent's observation that the working class were 'never in a position to exert complete control over his supply of reading matter', it is significant that, with the exception of John Crawley, the correspondents cited above vaguely requested 'som books'. Reading material was seemingly received with gratitude; the subject-matter appears to have been a secondary consideration.

Charles's request appears to have been abundantly granted. When his brother, Robert, left London for New Zealand in 1859, he was burdened with a box of books from Ware. In Robert's first letter to his old teacher, composed in May 1860, he informed Ware that he had given his brother 'Charley' a 'goodly stack' of books upon arrival.[78] In Charles's sixth letter, sent after Robert had arrived laden with books, he informed Ware that he was reading the *Southern Cross and Southern Crown*, a history of missions among the Maori published in 1857. In reference to this book, Charles told Ware 'I like it very much for I know some of the [Maori] language and can speak it'. Expanding on his encounters with Maoris, Charles added 'they look quare peple they are tattooed over there face'.[79] It is reasonable to assume that the *Southern Cross and Southern Crown* was among the 'goodly stack' of books Charles received from Ware, which suggests that Ware tried to send literature suited to the recipient's new environment.

Regardless of their educational accomplishments, Ware's former scholars entered a diverse range of manual trades. Bakers, farmhands, plasterers, shop assistants, and 'woodcutters' are all numbered among the correspondents, as well as army privates and navy seamen. Some, such as George Chapman, struggled to find work at all. Writing to Ware from 'Tronto' in December 1857, Chapman informed his former teacher that he was 'out of place and have not hernt one penny fore 5 weeks'.[80] Of particular pertinence here, Vincent notes with regard to the working class in the mid-nineteenth century that the notion of social mobility 'remained a

[77] SHC 1487/153/2, 20 August 1857.
[78] SHC 1487/156/1, 20 May 1860.
[79] SHC 1487/153/6, 21 March 1860.
[80] SHC 1487/124/4, 27 December 1857.

fantasy rather than a model they could hope to imitate'.[81] In accordance with this, the letters composed by former ragged school scholars suggest economic benefit was not an important motivation behind efforts to advance reading and writing. While literacy was valued by emigrants because it facilitated communication with loved ones overseas, those boys learning to read and write at Compton Place were likely motivated by a desire for self-improvement and, in Vincent's words, the 'very real area of independence' that literacy represented.[82]

The letters Ware received demonstrate that improvement in literacy was regarded with pride. A number of correspondents eagerly told Ware of their efforts to progress, such as Cornelius Keane who noted on 24 October 1857 that 'my kind mistress is improved my writing verry mutch so that I am able to reed and ['write' added here in pencil, likely by Ware] all my own letters'.[83] Dowie's correspondence in particular highlights the joy that could be associated with writing. His second letter, dated 16 January 1854, drew attention to his need for an amanuensis. Within this same letter he informed Ware that he was 'afraid it will be some time before I shall be able to write a letter by myself', after which he promised 'I shall do my best to learn'.[84] Four years later, in July 1859, Dowie succeeded in composing a letter in his own hand. The letter's opening sentence encapsulates its author's effort, as it reads: 'I ham vary sory that I was so calas in righten to you for you was allways a Father to me'. The letter closed with a request that Ware 'exquse my bad spallang and rittin'.[85] The stark difference between the spelling and presentation of this letter and those earlier composed on Dowie's behalf highlights his determination to improve his writing. Although abounding in spelling mistakes, the significance Dowie attached to composing the letter himself is suggested in his resolve to learn. As the most prolific correspondent, sending twenty-seven letters over eight years, Charles Restieaux's letters allow the development of his writing to be charted over time. In his initial letter Charles wrote 'every' instead of 'very';

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[81] Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, p. 148.
[82] Ibid., p. 166.
[83] SHC 1487/172/1, 24 October 1857.
[84] SHC 1487/129/2, 16 January 1854.
[85] SHC 1487/129/3, 18 July 1859.

however, by his fifth letter he had corrected this habit. His fourth letter in particular demonstrates the efforts former ragged scholars could invest in refining their prose. The letter boasts meticulously spaced lines, no doubt intended to prevent confusion with the lines overleaf on the tissue-like paper, and each character is painstakingly joined to its neighbour. On the first page he noted 'Mr Ware you said that I dont improve in my riting but I tring to by Keeping a Journal of what I do in the day'.[86] Whether this comment was defensive or apologetic cannot be discerned, yet it nevertheless indicates that he wished Ware to know of his efforts. This reference to Ware's words provides the sole glimpse into the teacher's part in the conversation on the matter of letter composition, demonstrating that, at least in this case, Ware commented on the quality of the letter he had received. It may be speculated that it was Ware who had corrected Charles's mistaken use of 'every'. Whether or not this was the case, Charles's correspondence, like that of many of his peers, testifies to the time, effort, and hope that could be invested in literacy.

Conclusions

Ragged schools bridged the yawning gap that separated poor children from education in the mid-nineteenth century. Despite the movement's exponential growth prior to the Education Acts and its practice of teaching poor children to both read and write, historians have overlooked its contribution to literacy in Victorian Britain. Existing studies of literacy do not give access to the destitute children who were the object of the ragged school movement. Scholarship on the education offered in ragged schools has been confined to governmental reports or accounts produced by the institutions themselves, both of which provide a subjective and removed interpretation of the children's abilities. Until now the time and energy that ragged school teachers and their scholars devoted to reading and writing has been unappreciated. The *OCM*'s efforts to inspire ragged school children to apply themselves to their lessons through laudatory stories and

[86] SHC 1487/153/4, 16 January [?].

gentle encouragement are effectively disregarded by scholars such as Clark and Webster, who rely instead upon inspectorate reports and employment data to ascertain not only the children's literacy, but the movement's attitude towards education. Clark's comment that 'academic distinction was not the prime aim' nullifies the considerable emphasis placed upon reading and writing by the movement that is evident in its literature. The letters Ware preserved, on the other hand, testify to the educational accomplishments of former ragged school scholars. Unlike the pristine versions of emigrant letters featured LRSU pamphlets, the collection explored here gives access to the author's handwriting, spelling, and corrections. The correspondence Ware received showcases the breadth of abilities found in his classroom; the literacy levels suggested by the letters encompass extremes of aptitude. While some emigrants relied on amanuenses to assist them in communicating with their homeland, others articulated themselves eloquently. The reliance upon phonetic spelling in many of the letters indicates the juvenile ability of some emigrants. Conversely, the punctuated writing of Frederick Henderson and Robert Restieaux demonstrates that some scholars attained considerable writing skills while at the school. The value placed on the written word, whether letters, newspapers, or books, is evident in much of the correspondence. The Compton Place letters enable working-class literacy to be explored from a different perspective, giving access to the emotional lives of young emigrants. The existence of this sizable collection demonstrates that, although often limited by poor literacy, former scholars strove to maintain contact with their old teacher. John Dowie's five letters to Ware reveal his determination to improve his writing, as he shared his efforts with the man who 'was allways a Father to me'. Furthermore, the pride and the embarrassment that could be attached to penmanship is evident across the letters. Illiteracy – or poor literacy – was often accompanied by feelings of shame, as demonstrated in the persistent efforts of many letter-writers to improve. The recurrent apologies of Charles Wiles on behalf of his handwriting suggest the emotional angst poor literacy could cause and the considerable impact it could have in limiting communication overseas. On the other hand, improvement was a source

of pride and joy, which former ragged school scholars shared with their old teacher through the very act of writing and sending letters. The time correspondents invested in improving their reading and writing further bolsters the scholarship of Burnett, Laqueur, Rose, and Vincent, demonstrating that there was patently a demand for education among the working class. More than this, the correspondence Ware received permits rare access to the immediate testimonies of young, working-class men who were striving to improve their literacy. As well as opening up understanding on how literacy was acquired, the letters shed light on the emotional and practical challenges faced. While autobiographies and memoirs composed in later life represent the 'finished product' of learning, this extensive collection permits a rare insight into the way in which literacy was developed and valued. By sending multiple letters to Ware, individuals such as Charles Restieaux have enabled us to snatch a glimpse into their efforts to 'improve in my riting'.

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