

Jesuits made educational history

by Yasmin Haskell

ONE OF THE MOST delicious paradoxes in the history of education is the fact that the Society of Jesus was effectively the greatest single publicity machine for the literature of pagan antiquity from the late Renaissance until the French Revolution. The ethos of the Society of Jesus was an apostolic one: its members were called less to contemplate than to preach, to harvest souls, to be and exert influence in the world. The order attracted active souls—missionaries, musicians, mathematicians, artists, architects, scientists, and poets—and all Jesuits were required to do a stint of teaching in the Society's free humanist schools.

The Jesuits are rightly acclaimed as the educators of early modern Catholic Europe. Among their brilliant alumni are Tasso, Descartes, Voltaire, and Boscovich. While their curriculum and pedagogical methods were based on Renaissance models, the Society of Jesus translated traditional elements into a spectacularly successful formula all their own, forging an international educational empire that stretched from Rome to Russia, Mexico to Macao. A Jesuit education culminated, ideally, in the higher study of philosophy and science, but students, all boys, had to pass through a series of graded "lower" classes in literature and rhetoric. Well into the eighteenth century this lower curriculum enjoined the study of the ancient languages, the reading of the pagan classics, and, above all, the active production of elegant and effective Latin verse and prose. Jesuit students, in short, were trained to go into the world as

impressively eloquent champions of the order and the faith.

There is a good deal of documentary evidence for what went on in the early modern Jesuit classroom. We know in detail the number and progression of classes, the authors studied, the types of tasks, and the time allocated to those tasks. We know the techniques practiced by Jesuit teachers to motivate and control their young charges. The sources reveal a high-pressured environment, to be sure, but not an excessively punitive one. Masters were not allowed to administer beatings, and the Jesuits were progressive in setting aside time for rest and recreation, for physical as well as spiritual exercise.

The lower classes could be extraordinarily large by modern standards (sometimes counting several hundred students), a measure of the spreading fame of the Society's schools, which increased in number from 245 at the end of the sixteenth century to 669 by the middle of the eighteenth.

How did Jesuit teachers cope with such numbers and such high expectations? They were bound to follow a meticulously researched "Code of Studies" (*Ratio Studiorum*), which was promulgated in its definitive form in 1599 after international consultation and in-school testing. The Ratio was no bald list of prescribed texts and expected "outcomes," however. It enshrined the whole Jesuit philosophy of education. Successive redactions of this document reveal that the strategy for, and to some extent goal of, teaching pagan classics to Christian boys was the fostering of two qualities highly prized by the Society of Jesus: competition and creativity.

As to the first, the early modern Jesuit classroom was unapologetically agonistic. There were regular intraclass and interclass competitions. Boys would be assigned a personal rival with whom to duel academically and were encouraged to point out one another's mistakes! There was division into ranked teams of ten, called *decuriae*, and further into class camps, with month-

Jesuit Roger Boscovich (1711–1787), a gifted student and famed teacher of mathematics, astronomy, and

philosophy, excelled as an author of

Latin verse as well. He was, according to the author, an exemplar of the Jesuit humanist tradition.



ly contests for promotion and demotion of so-called praetors, tribunes, senators, and so on.

If it all sounds rather militaristic, we should bear in mind that students were at the center of this active and fast-paced learning. The teacher's role was to channel the boys' natural high spirits, to correct exercises, to moderate, and to confer praise. His chief intellectual input was a daily *praelectio*, or introductory spiel, on the grammar point or classical author to be studied, but the fathers were exhorted not to be too pedantic, not to drown their charges in superfluous erudition.

Students, for their part, could not simply sit back and take dictation. They collaborated in the correction of classwork and competed energetically in using and reusing the classical models, relating them in often ingenious ways to their own experience. An eighteenth-century anthology of student verse from the college of La Flèche (Paris) includes a sequence of myths to explain the origins of fencing, bombs, musical organs, tapestries, mirrors, hair ornaments, wigs, and beauty spots, and another sequence of poems on youth sports and games, including badminton, tennis, billiards, chess, and snakes and ladders.

Beyond the classroom were exhibitions and prizes, the staging of original plays, and extracurricular "academies," where boys at every level could spend even more time perfecting their Latin style: through memory exercises, translation, composition of inscriptions, and enigmas, working out themes for dialogues, poems, and tragedies, and above all, imitation, imitation, imitation!

Françoise Waquet's *Latin or the Empire of a Sign: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, a stimulating and provocative book about Latin's domination of European culture since the Renaissance, has drawn attention to the gap that must always have existed between teachers' aspirations and students' actual achievement in the learning of the ancient language. She comes to the perhaps overly pessimistic conclusion that the gap was usually wide and produces many depressing testimonies by students whose young

lives were blighted by the daily grind of Latin grammar.

For better or worse, early modern Jesuit education was humanistic to its core, and there was no getting away from Latin (or Greek, for that matter). Certainly not everyone was destined to graduate with flying colors, just as not all of our own alumni will have mastered today's "indispensable" subjects, English and mathematics.

On the other hand, it is a testament to the Jesuits' way of proceeding with the classics that many of their students evidently did achieve a remarkable facility in Latin verse composition. We can infer this, at least, from the vast quantity of Latin poetry churned out by mature Jesuit priests on subjects from the spiritual to the secular to the scientific (they were the leading producers of didactic poetry, poetry of instruction in the arts and sciences, in the early modern period). No one was forcing them, and some recorded the pleasure they derived from the exercise.

All this may seem a world away from present-day concerns about declining standards of literacy and numeracy in our schools and universities, not to mention the raging ideological battle over "outcomes-based" education. But perhaps there are some lessons to be drawn, cautiously, from the experience, successes, and even deficiencies, of early modern Jesuit teachers.

Arts faculties and humanities teachers today regularly attempt to lure students into their nonprofessional courses with the promise of a flexible degree, which will suit them for the ever-evolving knowledge economy and a life of multiple career changes. The Jesuits were past masters of such flexibility. The greatest polymath of them all, Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), curator of the museum of the Roman College, sat at the center of a worldwide web of scientific and scholarly correspon-

dence and turned his hand to monumental works on hieroglyphics, Chinese, music, medicine, natural history, seismology, and cryptology. The chameleon-like Jesuits of the *ancien régime* had learned to create and recreate themselves in the classroom (and also, incidentally, to work effectively in teams).

But the Jesuit classroom was also a place where content was taken very seriously indeed, and the humanistic curriculum was considered an essential foundation for the higher study of physics and metaphysics. We might be inclined to dismiss the exclusive focus on ancient languages and literature in Jesuit schools as a waste of students' time, having no real connection with their subsequent professional or religious training. Early modern parents did not feel that way, though, and the beneficiaries of Jesuit humanist education did not dispense with it in the way that I, for one, have forgotten everything I once knew about trigonometry and calculus.

In the eighteenth century, the great Jesuit physicist Roger Boscovich devoted his rare leisure hours to composing a technical Latin poem on eclipses, while his sometime mathematics student, Bernardo Zamagna, wrote a rather more readable one about the construction of an airship. This was on the eve of the suppression of the Society of Jesus (1773) and a general waning of neo-Latin culture in the West. In its heyday, though, Latin humanism provided poets and teachers, doctors and lawyers, scholars and scientists, with a common ground of culture, which was shared and keenly cultivated by educated people throughout Europe and the New World. **C**



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