

# Dilworth's "Great Scholastic Fame": Thomas Dilworth and *The Rising Village*

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The schoolmaster and writer Thomas Dilworth (d. 1780), mentioned in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Rising Village*, has been given only passing attention by critics of the poem. For example, Michael Gnarowski, in his 1968 edition of the poem, describes Dilworth as "an English school master of the eighteenth century who produced several extremely popular and widely-used school books" (31). One such book, first published in England in 1740 and widely used in British colonies, including Canada, into the nineteenth century, was a grammar: Dilworth's *A New Guide to the English Tongue*. Dilworth's grammar, which was probably in use in Nova Scotia in the years before the publication of *The Rising Village*, could be one source which helps to explain the poem's preoccupation with both the moral and practical fitness of colonists in Nova Scotia. Given the fact that the only historical figures or organizations mentioned in the poem (Thomas Dilworth, Lord Dalhousie, and The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel [S.P.G]) are concerned either with practical or with religious teaching, a closer examination of Dilworth and his *New Guide* should throw light on Goldsmith's attitude towards the role of education in colonial Nova Scotia. Though the sentiments which Goldsmith and Dilworth share were common currency in late-eighteenth century conservative thought, the availability of Dilworth's grammar at the time of *The Rising Village* suggests that Dilworth's book may be one source from which Goldsmith gained some of his own ideas concerning moral education.

Dilworth's grammar combines lessons in language with lessons in moral behaviour through sentences in prose and verse. It seems appropriate, then, that Goldsmith refers to Dilworth's scholarly contributions in the schoolhouse scene in *The Rising Village*, since the success of the colony is shown to depend upon both practical and moral education, reflecting what Gerald Lynch calls "the poem's central concern with controlling nature in both its physical and human forms" (xiv). Both Dilworth's grammar and

Goldsmith's poem extol the values of hard work, obedience to one's King, Church and parents, and both express a deep distrust of pleasure or luxury in any form. Dilworth warns his students, in sentences that "add gloom to their didacticism" (Downey xiii), to prepare themselves for life's inevitable hardships; such hardships become real dangers faced by Goldsmith's early pioneers.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Goldsmith regards the same values which Dilworth wishes to inculcate in his students' minds as essential to the progress of early colonial life. That Dilworth's grammar was one means by which Goldsmith came to these values is suggested by several similarities between *A New Guide* and *The Rising Village*. As will be seen, certain sentiments and turns of phrase found in Dilworth's prose and verse and in the dedicatory poem found in the New Brunswick edition of Dilworth's grammar are echoed in Goldsmith's stanzas. Furthermore, both Dilworth and Goldsmith praise the work of the S.P.G. and of other educators in their dedications, which in Dilworth's case is a departure from the accepted tradition whereby schoolbooks were dedicated to a member of the Royal Family (Downey viii). Lastly, Goldsmith's use of a cautionary tale, the story of Flora and Albert, and his constant reminders to readers that an ordered and productive society depends upon the behaviour of its members reveals in the poem a pedagogical intent not unlike that of Dilworth.

Education in *The Rising Village*, whether it be of farm labourers or of the undisciplined youths in the schoolhouse scene, is portrayed in Goldsmith's poem as essential to Nova Scotia's success as a colony. Prior to the publication of *The Rising Village*, education became a matter of intense public interest in Nova Scotia, sparking off "the most heated religious controversy of the decade" (Fingard 141). While Goldsmith would have been barely out of his teens at the height of this debate, which began in 1814, it is unlikely that he would have been unaware of it since so many prominent members of Nova Scotia society were taking part. The debate became a sectarian issue that not only set Anglicans against other Protestant sects, but also caused dissent among the clergy themselves. The reference to Dilworth in the schoolhouse scene in *The Rising Village* may have sectarian overtones, since Dilworth's *New Guide* is dedicated to the "Reverend Promoters of Charity Schools, [who] cause[d] to be taught and ingrafted in the tender age of [their] Pupils the Principles of the best constituted Church of England" (1816 v). The Anglican Church in Nova Scotia supported charity schools funded by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Nova Scotia, and denounced inter-denominational missionary societies (Fingard 144), so Dilworth had at least this

sentiment in common with the churchmen who would influence the course of education in Nova Scotia.

While Anglicans were not in the majority in Nova Scotia, they saw themselves as "a stabilizing influence" opposed to the republican influence from America, and were thus encouraged by British colonial officials to maintain their hold on the minds and hearts of the colonists (Fingard 2). Both Bishop Charles Inglis and his son John, who succeeded him in 1825 (and to whom *The Rising Village* is dedicated), saw public education as a means of consolidating Anglican and Tory values held by the British establishment. The Anglican clergy were not alone in viewing mass education as essential to public stability; Thomas Chandler Haliburton wrote in 1823 that "an instructed and intelligent people are more decent and orderly than an ignorant one. They feel and know the respect due to themselves, and are more willing to pay a proper regard to their superiors in the different stations of life. It is this gives a security above the law, and confirms to Nova Scotia the blessing of undisturbed repose, with unbarred doors in its villages and retired settlements" (162). In the debates that occurred in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Anglican authorities argued that education in the province was a duty best left to their own appointed teachers, overseen by their clergy. However, shortages of men qualified, and, moreover, willing to work as school teachers, as well as the difficulty in ensuring continuous public funding of education for the poor led both Anglicans and secular authorities in Nova Scotia to consider novel methods of mass education that were being developed in Britain at the time. The system devised by Quaker schoolmaster Joseph Lancaster, in which hundreds of students could be overseen by one teacher, quickly gained popularity in Britain and North America, but was soon opposed by Anglican clergy on both sides of the Atlantic because of the system's avowed "neutrality in religion" (Kaestle 4). The Anglicans in Nova Scotia emulated their British counterparts in maintaining that "moral education was inconceivable without the sanction of religion" (Kaestle 17). They were willing instead to consider a modified version of the Lancastrian method developed by Anglican educator, Joseph Bell, which "included teaching in the principles of the Church of England" (Fingard 141). While the Anglicans were considering this system, the local philanthropist Walter Bromley had succeeded in gaining support from influential members of Nova Scotia society for his own system, an adaptation of the methods of both Bell and Lancaster, which offered non-denominational Christian instruction. Such a compromise perhaps better represented the religious makeup of the province's

population. A society to promote Bromley's system was formed, consisting of both Anglican clergy and prominent members of society, including Judge Brenton Haliburton, the father of Thomas Chandler Haliburton (Fingard 141). The harmony of this society was short-lived, however, for Anglican conservatives continued to insist on having exclusive control over religious teaching in the colony. Their anti-dissenter rhetoric soon alienated not only other Protestant sects, but the more liberal Anglicans as well (Fingard 144).

John Inglis, who became Bishop of Nova Scotia the same year that Goldsmith published *The Rising Village*, took part in the debate in 1814, writing that the schools run by the dissenters were "composed of low and illiterate men, some of whom are as vulgar and illiberal, and wild and mischievous as they are illiterate" (Fingard 145). It is difficult to establish how widely publicized this particular remark would have been at the time, written as it was in a private letter; but Goldsmith, Inglis's eventual *protégé*, uses similar language to describe the village schoolmaster, "Whose greatest source of knowledge or of skill / Consists of reading or in writing ill" (240-41). Still, there is nothing to support the notion that Goldsmith is making a specific attack against other Protestant schools, or against the Lancastrian system. There are few details in the schoolhouse passage that would indicate which denomination has hired this particular master; but since the Lancastrian system did not use textbooks, the possibility that a Lancastrian would be "spreading Dilworth's great scholastic fame" (242), or using his grammar books can be ruled out. It is more likely that Goldsmith's schoolmaster is under Anglican authority, since in the 1825 edition of the poem Goldsmith adds a footnote to the description of the country schoolhouse which praises the S.P.G. for setting up such schools throughout the province. Goldsmith, while not appearing to be taking part in sectarian squabbles, still creates a very ambivalent description of a school that is presumably under the auspices of the S.P.G. This seems to reflect a further concern of the Anglican establishment regarding public education.

In the two decades prior to the publication of *The Rising Village*, the educational aims of the Church and the S.P.G. diverged. The society was unwilling to fund anything other than rudimentary education for the poor, as illustrated by their hiring practices, which considered "well qualified teachers [to be] unsuited to the instruction of poor children." This state of affairs "undoubtedly frustrated Inglis' most ambitious designs" (Fingard 138) and may well have played a part in Goldsmith's own academic

frustrations at the Halifax Grammar School, where "an utter indifference was observed as to my progress" in any advanced classical learning which would have improved his prospects in the colony (*Autobiography* 85). It is perhaps his frustration with his tutor and "his worthless Instruction" that Goldsmith has in mind when he portrays the village schoolhouse in such regressive and sinister terms. "The schoolhouse section sounds the first clearly ominous note in *The Rising Village*" (Lynch xvii). Where other established buildings such as the church and country store speak of the advances in the spiritual and material refinement of the community, the "log-built shed" (231) that houses pupils and teacher seems temporary and ill-thought-out, affording mere "shelter" rather than comfort or convenience. While Goldsmith credits the S.P.G. for their support of education in the province, his ambivalent description of village education suggests that he may have shared the Inglis family's impatience with the progress of education in the colony. The fact that his poem and its description of an incompetent schoolmaster found support with John Inglis, who when succeeding his father as Bishop, endorsed Goldsmith's effort by claiming to "take an interest in the success of this little poem" (25) suggests that while Goldsmith did not take an actively partisan role in the debate about education, he found himself, in the words of D.M.R. Bentley, "quite cozily aligned with a colonial elite whose general Tory and loyalist views accord with what can be deduced of his own" (27).

The inadequacies of the school portrayed in *The Rising Village* would likely have alarmed Dilworth, who writes in the preface of his grammar, "that a good beginning is the most reasonable prospect of a good ending" (6). Goldsmith's opinions, as can be gathered from his poem, seem to indicate that this good beginning lies in a sound and strictly overseen moral education. His view that Dilworth's writing alone is not enough to control an unruly generation of "freeborn" youths (248) fits in neatly with the Anglican establishment's observation that "children needed instruction in doctrine and this particularly applied to poor children whose parents were too ignorant or irreligious to guide them in spiritual matters" (Fingard 141). Goldsmith's poem reflects the Church's contention that schools should provide moral as well as practical guidance. The poet implies that the values emphasized in the poem — hard work, piety, and obedience — are missing from the education in the village.

For Dilworth, the principles of morality and the practical rules of grammar are inseparable. This is evident not only in Dilworth's

text, but also in a poem by J. Duick which was dedicated to Dilworth and included in the New Brunswick edition of his grammar:

What thanks, my friend, should to thy care be given  
Which makes the paths to science smooth and even.  
Henceforth our youth who tread thy flowery way,  
Shall ne'er from rules of proper diction stray;  
No more their speech with barbarous terms be filled  
No more their pens a crop of nonsense yield.

Duick's verse implies that refinement of speech and expression reflects the advance of civilization; "barbarous" speech is the first indication that the educator has failed in his task. Lynch has demonstrated that the moral laxness portrayed in the poem can be traced back to the schoolhouse scene, and thus goes hand in hand with the general failure of learning (xix). The degraded skills that the schoolmaster imparts, of "reading and of writing ill" (240), foreshadow the inadequacies in the village youths' moral preparation. Goldsmith's description of their "sportive pleasures" (257), which serves as a preface to Flora's ruin, seems to recall the admonition that Duick gives Dilworth's scholars

Attend, ye sprightly youth, ye modest fair!  
Awhile be arts of dress your slighter care  
Awhile the precepts of these pages heed  
And richer ornaments will soon succeed.

In Goldsmith's lines, a "modest fair one" (281) is attending more to the flatteries of her "venturous youth" (277) than to Dilworth's precepts; a kiss from her is the "reward" (278) and the suitor's "well-earn'd fame" (280), and the "success" (282) described here seem to mock the scholastic achievement to which Duick exhorts Dilworth's students. The students in *The Rising Village* are more intent upon acquiring transitory "ornaments," than the more useful skills of correct speech; the reader can assume that it is "the shawl . . . stockings . . . hats and silks" (214-16) of the village store which hold their attention, now that the developing village has both the leisure and the material advantages that may lead its members astray. "Leisure and prosperity are mixed blessings" at this point in the village's history; they are rewards for hard work, but can also "prove fertile ground for the vice and luxury whose dangers were so well-known to Goldsmith and his readers" (Bentley 33). Such pleasures, denounced in Dilworth's prose sentences as "the Bane of the Mind" (117), are condemned by Goldsmith in similar language as the "baneful arts" of vice follow "in thoughtless pleasure's

train" (291-93).

The implied dangers of pleasure are elaborated upon in Goldsmith's story of Flora and Albert. Lynch sees the tale of Flora and Albert as "a moral exemplum" (xxii). This is borne out by the fact that the story has elements in common with the tales Dilworth includes in his grammar. In Dilworth's retelling of Aesop's fables, animals or humans disregard basic principles of honesty, obedience, or simple prudence and come to unhappy and sometimes bloody ends. Dilworth's fable on the value of obedience, for example, concerns an arrogant Kid, who, confident in her own judgment, disobeys her mother the goat, and is consequently devoured by a wolf who fools her by counterfeiting the nanny goat's voice. Dilworth concludes, in his gloss to the fable, that:

Children should obey their Parents, who are always better able to advise them than the Children can themselves. It is convenient also for young Men to lend an Ear to the Aged, who being more experienced in the Affairs of the World, can give them better Counsel, whereby they may avoid many Dangers. (121)

The fable stresses two points, namely obedience and the value of elders' experience. Lynch notes that in the case of Goldsmith's villagers, the people with the most experience are the older pioneers, who know too well "The danger, trouble, hardship, toil, and strife / Which chas'd each effort of . . . [their] struggling life" (165-66). The village youth, having learned to disregard the "lawful sway" of authorities in the village schoolhouse, are unlikely to respect the older pioneers' guidance (Lynch xx). Relying on his own judgment, Albert blindly follows "each rising impulse of the rising mind" (302) upon first meeting Flora. "Not long he sigh'd, by love and rapture fired"(327), he rashly declares his devotion. Consequently, Flora, like the inexperienced Kid, is deceived by a counterfeiter, and ultimately consumed by his deceit: Albert's heart "*seemed* generous, noble, kind and free" (315).

In the light of Goldsmith's tale, other sections of Dilworth's grammar appear relevant, particularly Dilworth's "Sentences in Verse." Albert and Flora's inexperience is a fault which Goldsmith lays at the door of the schoolmaster, whose students learned to "spurn at all control . . . Till, in their own conceit so wise they've grown / They think their knowledge far exceeds his own" (245-50). That Dilworth's poems may again have provided a model of the schoolmaster's inadequacy is suggested in his verse, "The Self-Wise":

Conceited thought, indulg'd without Control,  
Excludes all future Knowledge from the Soul:  
For he, that thinks himself already wise,  
In course, all further Knowledge will despise:  
And but for this, how many might have been  
Just, reputable, wise and honest Men.

(123)

The consequences of the school's failure to quell conceit and instill humility is visited upon the village youths, especially Albert, at a time when they are expected to begin assuming their place as adults in the community.

Goldsmith gives no reason in the poem for Albert's "sudden . . . change of heart" (370); this motiveless malignity, as it were, only serves to reinforce the fact that he is not bound by any sense of obligation or morality. However, if his actions are read in the light of Dilworth's poem, "Life is Short and Miserable," the fact that he abandons Flora in the middle of winter takes on further significance. Dilworth's description of life as "but a Winter's Day," decaying "like that frail Flower, which with the Sun's uprise, Her Bud unfolds, and with the Evening dies" (133), is echoed in *The Rising Village*, by the image of Flora's "fair and fragile form" succumbing to an Acadian snowstorm. In this section of *The Rising Village*, Goldsmith imparts a lesson similar to Dilworth's — that life, particularly in Acadia, is not all sunshine and flowers, a harsh fact that Albert is unprepared to face (Lynch xxi). Until winter arrives, "not one vow / Of his had e'er been broken . . ." (351-52); however, his pledge of constancy had been based on the pleasures of the moment when both love and the sun shed their "golden prospects" (334). Albert cannot bend his mind to the fact that commitment to Flora, and by extension to the pioneer community, will entail hardship as well as pleasure, and so the fairweather suitor abandons his bride when "the setting sun, with pale and cheerless glow" (345) presides over the Acadian winter, reflecting what Lynch sees as the poet's "greatest concern": that Acadia's inhabitants might "give up the struggle because of the harshness of the Acadian winter" (Lynch xxiv).

In failing to keep his vow when it means the most to his intended and to his community, Albert ultimately "degrade[s] the land" by his defection (432). His betrayal also results in Flora's degradation into madness, "from which she never recovers to be the source of fecundity implied by her name, and indeed required by the rising village" (Bentley 51). The didactic point Goldsmith makes in his



cautionary tale is that when an individual strays from virtue, there are serious public as well as personal implications. The damage that Albert has wrought upon his community is reflected in the language and imagery used in the cautionary tale, which links his betrayal to the dangers of "savage tribes" and "beasts" faced by early pioneers. The attacks upon the settlers at the poem's beginning occur at night and are dispelled by returning daylight, when "The wand'ring Indian turns another way" (99). The Flora and Albert story shows a reverse of the early settler's triumph over savage forces; news of Albert's desertion reaches Flora "at evening's hour" (343), and her ensuing madness drives her from the shelter of her home, not to "save [herself] by flight" as did the early settler, "dart[ing] from his hut" (92), but to destroy herself. There are other implications that Albert's action has pushed the community back towards the darkness of savagery. Bentley notes that "it may not be fortuitous that Flora's decline begins when a 'ruder footstep' than Albert's brings his treacherous 'letter to her door' " (52); "ruder," in this case suggesting a regression from the refinement of civilization to an earlier and more primitive stage of social development.

Goldsmith nevertheless reminds his readers that the story of Flora and Albert is merely a cautionary tale, and admonishes them to "think not oft such tales of real woe" (431) "degrade" the countryside. He does not dwell solely on the failures of civilization and control in his poem, since a moral exemplum should offer a reward for virtue as well as punishment for vice. "The two principle aims of *The Rising Village* are to celebrate Nova Scotia's achievement of the crucial agricultural stage of development and to provide the poem's readers with some glimpses of the future implied by this achievement" (Bentley 40). As an incentive for the settler to stay on the land, Goldsmith offers an idealized vision of Nova Scotia's thriving economy, "Where all the landscape brightens with delight / And boundless prospects stretch'd on every side, / Proclaim the country's industry and pride" (451-53). By bracketing his cautionary tale with "the pain, the danger and the toil" (57) of pioneer life, and with the rewards for these tribulations, Goldsmith sweetens the didacticism of his cautionary tale.

Goldsmith applies pedagogical methods that he shares with, and possibly even partly learned from, Dilworth to *The Rising Village*. The poet's faith in Providence, which sends the poem's settlers trials which are "by gracious Heav'n for wisest ends designed" (182), recalls Dilworth's "Sentences in Verse" which maintain that, "In all Misfortunes this Advantage lies, / They make us humble and they

make us Wise" (125). Dilworth praises "prudent Industry and Pain" in another verse; in *The Rising Village* it is this combination of humility, and "patient firmness and industrious toil"(103), along with education, that Goldsmith believes will make his vision of a thriving Nova Scotian agricultural industry a reality. Goldsmith's poem explores education on a number of levels; it examines the importance of education to both the well-being of individuals and to society in general, and it uses not only the tale of individuals, but also Nova Scotia's own past for pedagogical purposes. The poem continues, moreover, to promote the cause of public education in the preface and footnotes to the poem. Given the centrality of the theme of education to *The Rising Village*, the mention of Dilworth and his works takes on a greater significance than perhaps has previously been considered.

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