



# • The Educational Historian •

History of Queensland Education Society

Vol. 8, No. 1, 1995

## A dubious pleasure: Free milk for Queensland's school children

*Remember the days when your first task at little lunch was to consume a one-third bottle of milk? It was supposed to be a privilege and pleasure - a big white vitamin pill which helped you grow tall and strong - but, depending on how long the milk had been curdling in the sun, it could also be a chore enough to turn your stomach. This article looks at the origins and chequered history of the free milk scheme in schools.*

Though a free milk scheme was first introduced for Queensland children in 1953, the idea had been discussed on many occasions in earlier years. According to Dr Noel Gutteridge, a prominent Brisbane medico, such schemes originated in the work of Dr Cory Mann in Britain in the mid 1920s. During the early 1930s, when economic depression made popular nutrition a matter of some concern, Mann's work was successfully applied in various countries. In Queensland, depression era governments were not slow in looking at the idea but, unfortunately, teachers were adamantly opposed,

considering that too much teaching time would be spent in distributing the milk and collecting bottles and money. Consequently, the government limited the scheme to the provision of subsidised milk for unemployed under the auspices of the Department of Labour and Industry. Some Head Teachers of the 1930s, like Mrs Mabel Ferguson of the Fortitude Valley Girls and Infants school, encouraged milk vendors to visit during lunch breaks, and even allowed them into the school grounds, but this was as far as any special efforts went to encourage higher milk consumption among children.

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## **M**onograph

In this issue's monograph, Glenn Davies relates the extraordinary story of Thadeus O'Kane, an early Queensland newspaper editor. As a means of educating the populace, the influence of newspapers in colonial society was arguably even greater than it is today. O'Kane, the 'firebrand of the north', had something substantial and controversial to say about most of the great issues of the day, and his readers listened and learned!

*The Educational Historian*, the journal of the History of Queensland Education Society, is published three times a year by the Educational History Unit, Department of Education, to foster study, research and interest in the history of education in Queensland.

©HQES 1995  
ISSN 1038-1775  
Editor: Greg Logan

The journal is available through membership of the Society at \$20.00 p.a. Contributions are welcomed. All correspondence should be addressed to HQES, PO Box 12116, Brisbane Elizabeth Street, Q 4002.



*The day's free milk arrives at a Queensland country school in the 1950s.*

# Monograph

## 'Firebrand of the North':

### Thadeus O'Kane, educator of a generation

Glenn A. Davies

*From its beginnings in 1872, Charters Towers had a plethora of grogshops, and the evangelical fervour of the century ensured that the community also had a sufficiency of churches. Newspapers flourished and died in considerable numbers; most of them before the town became a city. However, to gain any attention from a capital over one thousand miles away to the south the diggers of Charters Towers needed a public forum for education in the important issues of the day. Throughout the nineteenth century the only available medium was the newspaper. In Charters Towers it was Thadeus O'Kane's Northern Miner which was responsible for the education of a generation to many of the popular political and secular treatises and ideas of the late nineteenth century. The Northern Miner was a north Queensland medium for secular and political education.*<sup>1</sup>

Newspapers flourished and died in considerable numbers in colonial Charters Towers. *The Northern Miner* was the first to appear on the gold field in 1872, was to outlive all its competitors (it still survives), and by its influence almost justified a well known aphorism of *The Queenslander*. In a moment of self-congratulation the colony's leading journal had remarked that 'a grogshop, a church and a gaol constitute a town, but a newspaper makes a city'.<sup>2</sup>

When Thadeus O'Kane took over editorship in 1873, Charters Towers was still a wild, tropical frontier town of bark huts and canvas tents. The gold field contained the 'new rich', many of them dazzled by the possession of a little money beyond their wildest dreams. Destitute of all education or culture, they rushed wildly for excitement into gambling and betting.

If any paper was recognisably the voice of Charters Towers during these halcyon years it was *The Northern Miner*. Long before the town won incorporation as a city, *The Northern Miner* had attained the dignity of respectable middle age. O'Kane was intimately involved in the process of establishing a community. As the gold field evolved from mining camp to thriving town, his influence on the educational development of his readers was unparalleled in northern Australia.

### Social role of colonial newspapers

Green emphasises the centrality of the newspaper to colonial culture,<sup>3</sup> and W.M. Corden wrote in 1956 that "Australian historians have tended to neglect the history of the Australian press".<sup>4</sup>

The provincial press in fact played a pivotal role in the progress of the precocious protean politics of north Queensland. The manner in which Queensland was settled, and the difficulty of communications between the scattered settlements were responsible for the emergence of an extremely strong sense of local consciousness. This was fostered by the establishment of local newspapers and journals, which reflected perceptions and attitudes of the settlement which supported them and, not infrequently, led their settlements in the creation of those perceptions

and attitudes. While local newspapers and journals fostered a sense of separateness, they tended to counterbalance this by breaking down isolation, by bringing news to the settlement from elsewhere in the extensive colony, and by educating their readers to the political and religious theories of the day. It is true that many of them were inclined to come and go; but Cryle has recently argued that this instability was not a deterrent to their provision of a systematic discussion of issues:

The strategic importance of the press as a vehicle for ideas and a medium of political organisation cannot be overemphasised.<sup>5</sup>

The colonial editor enjoyed a privileged position in this newspaper world, because it was through the editorial that the editor could provide a regular social and political commentary. Analysis of the character and influences of an editor can thus provide valuable insights into the forces that shaped a particular community and, at times, the colony.

Manion and Kirkpatrick have argued that Queensland editors were not uniformly well educated,<sup>6</sup> which may perhaps have acted to restrict their influence in some cases. It is true that in the second half of the nineteenth century a popular vocation for many men with at least a passing education was journalism. Their creative spirits were to find an outlet in the plethora of provincial papers. In this whirlwind of journals, papers, and issues, it was Thadeus O'Kane who stood head and shoulders above his scribbling peers. During the seventeen years he occupied the editorial perch, O'Kane was to be an inspiration to his colonial colleagues as a provincial catalyst for polemical discussions on the many popular

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political and social treatises and ideas of the late nineteenth century. The result was that many of his contemporaries were to look towards Thadeus O'Kane and his *Northern Miner* as the late nineteenth century standard for journalistic endeavours. In a number of ways it may have been a questionable standard, for a distinctive aspect of nineteenth century editors was a polemical tradition which operated simultaneously against government officials and other newspapers editors, and often led to the publication of libellous material. But it can also be argued that the positive side of the editor's work and influence generally outweighed these negative aspects.

## From Dingle to Maynooth

Thadeus O'Kane was born in Dingle, County Kerry, on 24 January 1820, the youngest of fourteen children of Gregory O'Kane, and Johanna, nee Fraimes.<sup>7</sup> He was christened Timothy Joseph. His family was apparently a prosperous one, for his father, listed as a 'gentleman', provided him with a liberal private education. The family appears to have been nationalist, for a priestly member named Father John O'Kane, was active in the landlord-tenant 'wars' in County Kerry, inciting the tenantry to resist their landlords' direction on how to vote.<sup>8</sup> This priest's relationship with Timothy Joseph is unclear. But he is probably the same Father John O'Kane who was mortgagee of *The Kerry Star* when Timothy Joseph was owner-editor, and was possibly also the

priestly uncle [who] interested [himself] in [his] nephew and sent [him] up to Maynooth to be educated at the expense of the already impoverished Irish peasantry and the Maynooth Grant.<sup>9</sup>

At a young age O'Kane had already possessed substantial educational qualifications. In September 1839, at the age of nineteen, Timothy Joseph O'Kane enrolled in the humanities class at Maynooth Seminary, County Kildare, to read for the priesthood.<sup>10</sup> Here, he gained a classical, liberal education which was of great benefit in years to come. Later O'Kane claimed to have been a 'first class prizeman' at Maynooth<sup>11</sup>, and to have won prizes in the Belles Lettres and Rhetoric classes.<sup>12</sup> This classical training can be seen in the sprinkling of Latin tags in *The Northern Miner*. He later vigorously denied that he had been expelled from Maynooth<sup>13</sup>, but he certainly left in 1846 without being ordained.<sup>14</sup>

After leaving Maynooth, O'Kane went to London where he practised radical journalism, at least until his putative marriage to Margaret Matilda Augusta Morris on 2 October 1851.<sup>15</sup> During the 1850s the O'Kanes lived in a number of residences in England and Ireland, and eventually had a family of one son and four daughters, all born in Ireland. By 1857 O'Kane and his wife had returned to Ireland where he conducted a school for advanced pupils at Killarney. Between 1861 and 1863 he published *The Kerry Star* at Tralee and, after the sale of this newspaper, moved his family to London.

Soon after, the scandal that was to cause his exile and to land him, eventually, in Charters Towers, reverberated through London society. While working in London as a journalist, O'Kane became entangled with the then Prime Minister, Henry John Temple, Viscount Palmerston, when he sued for divorce, citing Lord Palmerston as co-respondent, and claiming £20 000 damage. O'Kane lost the case, and immediately

emigrated to Australia, where he adopted the name of Thadeus John O'Kane. He worked on a number of newspapers in Brisbane and Rockhampton, and operated a private school for several years before he moved to Charters Towers.<sup>16</sup>

## O'Kane in Charters Towers

When Thadeus O'Kane arrived at Charters Towers in 1873 he was, at fifty-three, one of the oldest men on the goldfield. According to one description, O'Kane was a spare, grizzled man, about middle height, soft and cultured in speech, and with all the little touches of the public school and university.<sup>17</sup>

There is a melancholy symbolism in the circumstances of his arrival. Once before, on the failure of his first essay into journalism in England, he had returned to Ireland and fallen back on teaching. On that occasion, he had moved on to the editorship of an independent newspaper, only to lose it within two years.

His experiences in Australia seemed to parallel those of his Irish years. Each of his essays into journalism had failed, leaving him with that last beggarly alternative of the educated man, teaching! Now, and probably for the last time, he was being offered another entree to journalism.

O'Kane obtained a half-share in *The Northern Miner*, and on 12 January 1874 became sole proprietor. Apart from his attempts at a political career, *The Northern Miner* was to be his main interest until his forced retirement on medical grounds just before his seventieth birthday. He built *The Northern Miner* into a far-reaching vehicle for the transmission of his views:

for the seventeen years until his death in 1890, the history of *The Northern Miner* was very much a history of Thadeus O'Kane with his influence extending far beyond the boundaries of Charters Towers.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most educated and cultured men on the field, O'Kane was the conscience of the goldfield, the self-appointed scourge of its offenders, for almost two decades. *The Northern Miner* had become the leading journal in Charters Towers which, by the time of O'Kane's death in 1890, had a population of about nineteen thousand, and was the leading mining centre in Queensland. O'Kane was intimately connected with the history of the city during its rise and heyday, and his activities are well-documented, not least through court records, having been sued for libel on numerous occasions. From his perch as editor of the oldest newspaper on the goldfield he documented follies and greed, and he paid for it.

His eye was ever on the alert for an affront to himself or his public morals. It was a keen, aggressive, Irish eye. And his pen was vitriolic. Of course, he was 'agin' the Government, but more particularly against all persons in authority, and every issue of the 'Miner' revealed the wickedness and incompetence of Charters Towers officialdom - that is, as Mr. Thaddeus [sic] O'Kane saw it.<sup>19</sup>

As an editor, Thadeus O'Kane, the rambunctious Irishman, was a persuasive advocate for republicanism, the Liberal party, separation, Irish home rule, mining development, and miners' safety.<sup>20</sup>

He also took a strong interest in the improvement of conditions on the gold fields of Charters Towers. In O'Kane the miners had found a loyal champion, and one possessing, in *The Northern Miner*, a far-reaching soap box. At the same time, the emerging establishment of Charters



Towers had found a critic who could not be muzzled. Boycotts were imposed, numerous libel actions were brought, but Thadeus O'Kane continued unabated and unrepentant.

*The Northern Miner* published extracts from the works of many contemporary writers. Before and after the publication of works by such authors, poets and thinkers as Alfred Russell Wallace<sup>21</sup>, John Milton<sup>22</sup>, and Henry George,<sup>23</sup> there ideas were discussed at length in O'Kane's columns. Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* was a particularly popular subject,<sup>24</sup> possibly because its discussion of land taxation revived in O'Kane memories of his experiences in Ireland. In the 1880s, O'Kane ran a column entitled 'Aesthetics', which dealt with such esoteric topics as the defence of Latin<sup>25</sup>, and he also ran an 'Independent Column', which brought to the miners' notice such diverse characters as John Stuart Mill and his 'On Liberty'<sup>26</sup>, the poet Henry Kendall<sup>27</sup>, the theologian Joseph Cook<sup>28</sup>, and the humanitarian Florence Nightingale.<sup>29</sup> O'Kane prided himself on his literary tastes. He claimed that copies of Homer, Tacitus, and Horace were always on his desk<sup>30</sup>, took considerable pride in the fact that he was 'a first-class prizeman of Maynooth', and claimed that he was responsible for introducing to the local School of Arts Library the works of Tyndall, Darwin, Huxley, Colenso, and others of that genre.<sup>31</sup>

Politically, O'Kane was in the British liberal tradition. He supported the liberal faction in Queensland politics, was vociferously xenophobic, and, as early as 1885, favoured female emancipation.<sup>32</sup> The excesses of the latter day fenians disgusted him, for violence, outside the spoken word, was never his metier.<sup>33</sup> O'Kane attracted considerable criticism for his refusal to endorse the strike action of the unions in the Newcastle strikes in 1889. In a *Northern Miner* leader in 1889, he advocated education rather than strike action as the means for reconciling capital and labour.<sup>34</sup>

## O'Kane and education

During his political campaign of 1883, O'Kane was promoted as 'The Champion of Free Secular and Compulsory Education'.<sup>35</sup> He was also a prominent member of the Boards of the School of Arts and State School, and was largely responsible for establishing a School of Mines in Charters Towers.<sup>36</sup>

As an avid supporter of national education, O'Kane denounced the sectarian hatred that pervaded the colony as a whole. This hatred of religious extremism was typical of most people in Charters Towers; they refused to accept the imposition of puritan ideals and sectarianism upon the community by zealous Christian minorities. Temperance, anti-gambling sentiment, and Sabbatarianism were anathema in a society where life was primarily a drive towards increased material prosperity, and physical comfort and pleasure.

The 1870s were the crucial years in Queensland for the great debate over the role of the State in education, and the State's role (if any) in supporting schools belonging to religious groups.<sup>37</sup> In Queensland, as in all colonies, the Roman Catholic Church was involved to a greater extent in education than any other denomination and stood to lose most by anti-State aid policies. Initially, the Church of England's Bishop E.W. Tufnell, supported his Catholic counterpart, Bishop James Quinn, in the latter's somewhat desperate attempts to retain the Government's assistance. But in general non-Catholic Churches supported and canvassed for the passage of the State Education Act of 1875. Committing the colony to a national system of education to be funded by the

Government and controlled by a Minister for Public Instruction, the Education Act made no financial provisions for denominational schools.<sup>38</sup> Many Catholics throughout the colony bemoaned this development, for to them the responsibility for education remained solely with the Church. Taking the view that 'religious influences alone could hope to sanctify and convert it [education] from a two-edged sword into an olive branch of blessing',<sup>39</sup> the Catholic Church in particular bemoaned the passage of the Act.

Some of the ordinary people of Charters Towers knew a little of Darwin's conclusions, and of other notions which seemed to cast doubt on the basic principles of the Christian religion. However, their knowledge came not from reading the original treatises. On the contrary, they were more likely to gain a piecemeal comprehension of these theories through the almost daily tirades in *The Northern Miner*. These tirades conceptualised religion as a corrupt and hollow misrepresentation of Christ's example and teachings, which had now been relegated to uselessness by the scientific approach of Darwin and his contemporaries.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the Charters Towers community was exposed to frequent secular reappraisals of the nature of man and religion in public lectures, particularly those sponsored by the Freethinker group<sup>41</sup> and the Secular Association.<sup>42</sup> The topics discussed by these two groups, together with their scheduled times of meeting (on Sunday mornings!), both suggested a definite 'Godless' orientation, one which was apparently shared by the many citizens who attended the meetings.<sup>43</sup>

Although such ideas, probably accepted relatively uncritically by many people in Charters Towers, did not serve specifically to make the community secular, they did provide justification for the thoughts of many of its citizens who had come to place little store on the Church in their lives. Thus, Rayner contends that it was through such methods as the press and lectures that

the diffused ideas emanating from the scholars became to the popular mind simple statements, such as that man was descended from the apes and that the Bible was untrue.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

To gain any attention from a capital over one thousand miles away to the south the diggers of Charters Towers needed a public forum for education in the important issues of the day. Throughout the nineteenth century the only available medium was the newspaper. Thadeus O'Kane was an influential educator during the 1870s and 1880s. It was his voice, sardonic, critical, sometimes erratic but always independent, that made his newspaper a byword throughout Australia, and when he died in early 1890 most major newspapers in every colony carried obituaries, whose general tenor was that something unique had gone from Australian journalism. *The Northern Miner* under O'Kane's leadership was responsible for the education of a generation to many of the popular political and secular treatises and ideas of the late nineteenth century. In O'Kane's own words:

We look over their heads (his enemies) with steadfast eyes to the single purpose of our life, to rouse up the people to their true and rightful place in God's earth, to break the chains of ignorance and superstition which have hitherto held them in miserable bondage.<sup>45</sup>

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