

The Grammar School and Education in Sierra Leone, 1845-1942

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The history of the founding of the Grammar school is tied up with the early fortunes of the Colony of Sierra Leone and the early history of the other Institution founded by the CMS around the same time, the Christian Institution which became Fourah Bay College. Bear with me therefore while I lead you through the emergence of the CMS and its links with and concentration on Christian education in Sierra Leone leading to the founding of our beloved Sierra Leone Grammar School.

The CMS started in 1799 as the "Society for Missions to Africa and the East". It was founded by the Abolitionists, people like William Wilberforce and Henry Thornton who was the first treasurer of the new society, and Chairman of the Sierra Leone Company which ruled Sierra Leone at its inception. The name of the society was later changed to the CMS. Soon after its founding, the CMS turned its attention to Africa and its first missionaries were sent to Africa in 1804. The attention to Africa was greatly stimulated by the founding of the colony of Sierra Leone and a sense of commitment of its founders and early sponsors to bring their own version of advancement to the new settlement. Thus their first effort was a mission station around that area, in the Rio Pongas where an earlier missionary's offer to do translations from Soso decided the issue. The Rio Pongas mission failed to make any dent in an area dominated by Islam and the Sierra Leone colony thus quickly became the main focus for Christianity and its attendant educational efforts.

The CMS had started a Christian Institution at Leicester in 1815, intended for "the maintenance and education of African children and for the diffusion of Christianity and useful knowledge among the Natives" temporary buildings were erected on Leceister Peak and the school started in 1816 with about 350 children of both sexes. They were being taught basic crafts with a heavy emphasis on Christianity. The Institution literally collapsed in 1820 and its buildings were converted into a hospital for Liberated Africans. The Institution was transferred to Regent but on the death of the Rev W.A. B. Johnson who supervised the school, the Christian Institution was abandoned in 1826. In 1827, the CMS sent Rev. Haensel to revive the Institution to serve as a feeder to a proposed college at Islington, England where they would obtain higher education. The Regent buildings being beyond repair, The CMS bought property of late Governor Turner at what was called Farren Point at Fourah Bay for 330 pounds and thus the Fourah Bay College started as a revival of the Christina Institution. The intention by this time was to provide as high a standard of education as possible, preparing its products to be teachers and missionaries to their own countrymen. Instruction included Reading, writing, music, arithmetic, geography and a healthy dose of Bible history and doctrines. The initial emphasis on crafts in the Christian Institution had thus been abandoned and the first products of Fourah Bay actually found difficulty gaining employment in a fledgling colony which had very few positions for people with their kind of education.

By the 1840s, it had become evident that the academic standard of Fourah Bay College was getting much higher than that which obtained in the regular school system.

This meant that it would become difficult to recruit new entrants into FBC from the existing school system. It was therefore necessary to establish a second tier school, the real meaning of secondary school, to bridge the gap between the primary schools and the College. As the CMS began to actively pursue this idea, it received assistance from another organization in London called "The African Native Agency Committee" which provided 150 pounds sterling per annum for a three year period to train four African youths at FBC or at the proposed grammar school. Thus the CMS pressed on with the plan and procured land at Regent Square in Freetown, the source of the famous term, Regentonian. It should be interesting to note that this building, offered by the colonial government at an annual rent of two shillings and sixpence, a token sum, used to be the residence of the Governor of the Colony until 1841, just four years before the Grammar school started. It used to be called the "house of arches" due to the imposing arches on all sides of the building.

From 1840 -1858, FBC was headed by Rev. Edward Jones, an African American who provided opportunities for the students to train as teachers by apprenticing them to teach in Sunday schools and employing them as district visitors. It was in Rev. Jones' tenure that the Grammar School was born. Fourteen junior students of FBC were transferred from that college to start the Grammar School. Let us make an analysis of those 14 foundation pupils. Five of them came from the Gallinas. Two of these five had previously been at FBC two years earlier, the sons of one of the rulers of the Gallinas and their last name was Gomez. The other three had only recently been secured by the CMS after one of the schooners fighting against the slave trade in the Gallinas had brought these boys to Freetown with the approval of their father, the Gallinas king. The CMS hoped that these boys would serve as a beacon for the spread of Christianity to those areas if they were given western education and Christianity. Thus the idea of educating the sons of rulers in the interior as a means of advancing western values and Christianity to those areas, the same idea that later led to the founding of Bo School in 1906, had found a ready pursuit in the Grammar School.

Of the other nine foundation pupils, three of them – Joseph Flynn, Charles Macauley and Charles Nelson – were from Kissy. Daniel Carol came from Freetown and Robert Cross, who was a man of thirty when enrolled, came from Fourah Bay. Two others, James Quaker and Thomas Smith, came from Kent. One student named Frederick Karli came from Port Loko. The Port Loko entrant needs some explanation. Missionary work had started in 1840 at Port Loko by the Rev. Schlenker leading to the establishment of a Church and school there.

In all then, six of the foundation pupils or 43% of them came from what became the Provinces of Sierra Leone. The Grammar School could thus be said to have pioneered the way towards a much more forceful movement towards national integration even at its very inception in 1845.

The first principal of the school was Rev. Thomas Peyton and the curriculum represented a high standard of grammar school education with subjects in English grammar and composition, Greek, mathematics, geography, Bible history, astronomy, doctrine, English history, writing and music. Latin was later introduced as a voluntary class subject. Euclid and algebra were added later still. The early pupils distinguished themselves earning favorable comparisons between their performance and those of English students from

Principal Peyton, at a time when racist perceptions of African mental inferiority were very high. The establishment of Christianity was a dominant focus of the new dispensation so that the new pupils had to become Christians. Two of the pupils were baptized on 14 September, 1845 and nine were candidates for Holy Communion by that time.

The Grammar School set the tone for secondary education throughout Sierra Leone and West Africa, particularly because for twenty years it was the only secondary school in West Africa. By 1849 its roll included pupils from the entire sub-region of West Africa many of them fee paying students while a few were financially supported by the CMS, the African Native Agency mentioned earlier and some philanthropic bodies. At the end of 1850, the enrolment was fifty-five scholars and school fees collected totaled 187 pounds 16 shillings and 2d.

An attempt was made in 1851 when the CMS instructed Principal Peyton to introduce practical education training to the curriculum. Peyton bought a school farm of six acres at King Tom and pupils worked on the farm growing cotton. In 1853, the CMS sent a trained industrial education specialist C. Hammond to Freetown to open a model industrial school at Kissy, teaching mostly practical arts. The products of this school were expected to go on to the Grammar School to be trained as teachers and later to FBC. This program never worked well at the Kissy School. The truth of the matter was that the British were trying to introduce to Sierra Leone a pattern of industrial education with which they themselves had no experience and therefore no capability to provide the right sense of direction in this matter.

The Sierra Leone Grammar School was also in the forefront in teacher training a few years after its inception. The school was divided in the 1850s into a teacher training section on the one hand, and on the other a general education and FBC entrance preparation section. In the teacher training section students took English, arithmetic, geography, western civilization, scripture, history and school management. To these same subjects were added mathematics, classics and Greek Testament in the general education and FBC entrance preparation section. The Grammar school thus led the way in training teachers for particularly the primary schools in Sierra Leone and this gave a tremendous boost to the quality of primary education in Sierra Leone. The Grammar school also supplied the educated cadres to what became the backbone to the incipient middle class in particularly the British West African colonies in the Gambia, Gold Coast and Nigeria.

The quality of education at the Grammar school was very high, so that when the CMS began to have problems of staffing it decided that the Grammar School was good enough and that Fourah Bay College should be closed, which was done temporarily in 1858. Indeed in 1846, Governor Macdonald gave personal prizes of five pounds, then a princely sum to deserving students at the Grammar School and at Fourah Bay College, a big recognition in the Colony for deserving students. The Rev Peyton, the first principal, died on 14 June, 1853 at the School and was buried in Freetown. So close was the administration of the school with FBC (Peyton had come to the school from FBC) that it was the Principal of FBC, Rev. E. Jones, who supervised the school until the new Principal, Rev. John Milward arrived in November 1855.

Funding for the Grammar School, as for FBC was initially borne by the CMS. The Grammar School instituted fee paying and before 1850 most of its students were paying fees. By 1850 the support of the CMS had become restricted to paying the salary of the European principal of the Grammar school. A healthy collection of school fees sustained the school.

The type of grammar school education that the Grammar school sustained had some perhaps unfortunate consequences. We had mentioned earlier the failure of the attempt to introduce the practical skills like farming and carpentry. As the failure of this attempt left the Grammar School with offering only 'academic' education with what one governor later referred to as 'rote learning of Greek and Latin', the products of the school began to be removed from considering the practical arts as part of education and to believe that the learning of Latin and Greek was the most desirable thing. Attitudes were being formed related to class which snubbed the practical pursuits as being for the lower class. This was reinforced as the newly Liberated Africans were funneled into schools meant specifically for them and the Grammar school and FBC were reserved for what Sumner, the main historian of education in Sierra Leone, calls "the better class of natives." These attitudes took hold and perhaps contributed to the denigration of practical arts, so harmful to our development today.

However, by the beginning 1860s, some of the pupils were being trained in navigation. Four of them – Tobiah Brown of Kissy, Alfred Lewis, Francis Joaque and F. Gibson, were admitted on board the HMS Rattlesnake to acquire practical training in navigation. As the school grew, 87 pupils by 1863, it became necessary to divide it up into a Preparatory and Upper school. Many of the senior pupils, who had been acting as pupil teachers of the younger ones, had left and this created a staffing problem, necessitating the division of the school. And the school was prospering, taking in fees that year of over four hundred pounds. It then became possible by the 1870s to send some of the more promising students for further training in England at Islington and other centers. Thus Moses Bentick, Obadiah Moore, later to become principal, William Gates, John Bernard Bowen, M.J. Marke were all sent to England for higher education.

A profile of Rev. Obadiah Moore would give some indication of the relationship between pupil and teacher roles and the movement of students through the school by the 1870s. Born at the village of York in 1849, Obadiah joined the school as Obadiah Punch in May 1863 at around age 14, sponsored by the CMS.. After three years as a pupil there, he was transferred to Fourah Bay College in January 1867 and he studied there for another three years. He returned to the Grammar School, as Junior tutor in 1870, the senior tutor then being Mr. John Tilly Asgil. When Asgil left the school for another vocation, Moore became Senior Tutor in 1871. He was then sent to England together with Canon Spain in July 1875 and spent 18 months at Monkton Coombe College at Bath, Somerset where he obtained the Certificate of the Senior Oxford Local Examination. He returned to the school at the end of 1876 to take up his position as Senior Tutor. In 1877 he was ordained a pastor and attached to Christ Church. He left the school and accepted the pastorate of St. Matthews in Sherbro in 1880. When Principal Quaker died in 1882, Obadiah Moore was made Principal. In this profile one can see the relationship between FBC and the school coming in stark relief right down to the end of the nineteenth century. By 1905 when George Garrett took over as Principal, he had seven African tutors, all graduates of Durham University through Fourah Bay College.

One notable deviation occurred with respect to the mainstream education for which the Grammar School had become traditional. Under the principalship of Rev. James Quaker, a printing press was started in the school in 1871. The instructor in charge of the press was named Mr. James Millar and he hailed from Waterloo. The press gave birth two years later to a twice monthly newspaper titled "The Ethiopia" edited by the Principal. The choice of "Ethiopia" is significant here, for educated Africans in the diaspora as well as in Africa identified their indigenous advancement with Ethiopia, the oldest surviving independent state in Africa, the seat of one of the earliest civilizations of the world. This was undoubtedly an expression of African aspirations in the new dispensation of colonial rule which came very early in Sierra Leone.

The newspaper the Ethiopia brought even greater popularity to the Grammar School. It brought resources too, for the funds that it brought in made it possible for some of the school's staff to be supported to acquire further training at Institutions in England like the one at Islington. Again, the Grammar school had pioneered in Africa one of the pillars of democracy, a vibrant press.

Similarly so it was the Grammar School which pioneered the Boys Scout Movement in Sierra Leone, for that movement was initiated by Principal G.G. Garrett in 1908, only one year after the parent movement was started by Lord Baden-Powell in England.

The call for diverse education other than 'academic' education which would better fit the products for employment continued throughout the life of the school, first advanced, as mentioned earlier, by the CMS and attempted sporadically by them with the setting up of the Model School at Kissy in 1850. By the 1920s this call was earnestly taken up by the products of the Grammar School themselves. To celebrate the 90th anniversary of the School in 1945, one of the Alumni A.E. Tuboku-Metzger, MBE, JP MA, wrote a surviving treatise titled *Historical Sketch of the Sierra Leone Grammar School, 1845-1935* which has become a major source of reference on the school. His admonition in this pamphlet, echoing the thinking of the leading alumni of the School, is worthy of lengthy quotation. He maintained:

We strongly need science and industrial training in the School. There are those among our friends of the white race and amongst our own people who assert with a good degree of earnestness that there is no difference between the white man and the black man. This sounds very pleasant to the ear and tickles the fancy, and may be so in intellectual training; but when we apply the test of cold logic to it we must acknowledge that there is a difference, not an inherent one, or one belonging to our nature, not a racial one, but one growing out of unequal opportunities. We have not the opportunities of the white man, and our weak point has been in our failing to recognize the difference. Our education has begun too nearly at the point where the white man has reached after years of toil. Behind the present education of the Englishman are hundreds of years of toil, suffering, sacrifice and economy. His present education is backed by industrial and scientific training and he has been taught to recognize the dignity of labour. It is true that we have white men among us whose education is only literary; but they have thousands of their race who maintain the industries of their country for the need of all.

The present education is one of mental development, handicapped by prejudice and lack of employment which tend to discourage the whole life of the student. We want mental development, and need professional men and women and those of the pen; but we need also scientific and industrial education, and the man with the hoe and matchet; we need also mental development tied to heart and hand training which will be our salvation.

These were weighty words indeed. They were echoed by the then principal of the school Rev. T.S. Johnson, MA, BD, that great educationist who rose to become the first African Asst. Anglican Bishop of Sierra Leone. In his annual report for the school in 1935, Rev. Johnson averred that people have come to realize that education demanded more than a mastery of educational principles. Living in an age of revolutionary changes, Rev. Johnson warned that the new products of the school would have to adjust to vastly different conditions from those experienced by their forebears at the Grammar School. Drastic changes in the final outcome of their education were necessary to meet these new challenges rather than what he called "a blind following of tradition, however entrenched it may be". Of course by tradition here he meant what had become the traditional education of the Grammar School, the 'academic' type of education. Boys were leaving school without prospect of employment and so their education should not end up merely loading them 'with a quantity of academic stuff' but to prepare them for the varied needs of life which were often non academic.

Some attempts were made to address these concerns. Weaving and spinning was introduced by the vice principal of the school in 1927. Rev. T.S. Johnson himself as principal attempted to revive carpentry and introduce basket making in the school's curriculum. Clubs like agriculture, carpentry and poultry were introduced into the social education program in order to keep the spirit alive. These never took hold as the grammar school type of education had by now become deep rooted in the curriculum and in the psyche of the majority of those who supported the school.

The printing press however continued to remain important and Principal P.H. Wilson saw to it that the press was expanded to include regular instruction. Book-binding, cardboard modeling and elementary arts were being taught by the end of the 1930s decade. Alas, however the instructor, a Mr. Clay died suddenly in 1942 and with him went the printing program of the school.

In as far as the academic tradition remained, the Sierra Leone Grammar School excelled and has continued to do so. Special features of the 1920s, in the principalship of Rev. T.C. John was that there was a school brass band, as Tuboku-Metzger describes it, "to contribute to the pleasures and hilarities of the pupils and to develop comradeship between past and present pupils." In the days of Principal Quaker, there was a drum and fife band with the flute being a special treat. School anniversaries were marked by the band leading the pupils on a march to FBC grounds and other places. Rev. Quaker also got instructors from the Regimental Band to go and teach members of the school band to play the fife and other instruments. Canon Moore introduced a brass and reed band with a diversity of instruments. The band was well known by the beginning of the twentieth century, but faded away by 1915. It was revived by the Alumni in 1924. Canon John, who used to play in the band as a pupil supported the old boys in their subscription lists which collected money to revive the band