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Project Purley

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The Purley Scandal

Summary

The dismissal of Mrs Rebecca Moule who was the head teacher at Purley C of E School in 1908 created a scandal which reverberated through Berkshire County Council and as far as the House of Commons. It was one of the earliest cases taken up by the National Union of Teachers. It was created by the attitude of the Reverend John Dudley Matthews, the rector of Purley towards her daughter who had left her husband.

Introduction

This name was given to a matter which raged from Purley to the House of Commons in 1908. It concerned Mrs Rebecca Moule who had been head mistress of the village school since 1895. Her daughter had been married but had returned to her mother's home soon after a baby was born. Mrs Moule was dismissed because this arrangement offended the rector.

Her case was taken up by the National Union of Teachers but she was not reinstated.

The Dismissal

Her only daughter had become pregnant and at the end of July 1907, three days after Mrs Moule got to know of her condition, the daughter was married. After the marriage the daughter left home and did not return until after the child was born. On 21st November she returned to the village to live with her mother.

Upon hearing this, the rector, the Reverend John Dudley Matthews sent for her and subjected her to a grilling. She answered all his questions as best she could. The rector then wrote to her saying he expected her to make a promise that her daughter and the child must be driven away for at least six months.

Mrs Moule asked on November 30th if she could be present at the next meeting of the school managers so that she could explain her circumstances. This the rector would not agree to. She was however summoned to a second meeting a short while later and after the case had been considered she was dismissed.

The view taken by the managers was that Mrs Moule had been engaged on a contract which allowed for a termination with three months notice on either side. In view of the publicity which the case had aroused they felt it would not be in the best interests of the school for her to continue. The matter was referred to a subcommittee of the County Council's Education Committee. They took the view that the managers had acted quite properly within their delegated powers and that they should not interfere. It would have been a very serious matter for the sub-committee to have passed a vote of censure on the managers and this they were not prepared to do. The only sanction they would have would be to withhold maintenance funds.

The recommendation went to the full Education Committee who supported the sub-committee on the casting vote of the chairman.

The Public Outcry

Meanwhile Mrs Moule had appealed to the National Union of Teachers for assistance and the case had attracted widespread press coverage. There were even questions asked in the House of Commons. A petition was drawn up on her behalf.

The Special Meeting of the County Council

The pressure for action was so great that eventually a special meeting of the County Council was called for Saturday 13th June 1908 at which the matter was considered in detail.

The debate was on a motion put forward by Cllr CW Cox of Bray: *-That this Council desires to strongly express its opinion that the circumstances under which the managers of the Purley Church of England School have given notice to their headmistress to terminate her engagement do not justify the Education Committee in giving their sanction to the action of the managers, and urge upon the Education Committee the desirability of reconsidering their report with a view to the reinstatement of the headmistress.* The chairman immediately ruled the last part (underlined) as being out of order, and confirmed that whatever the outcome there was no question of Mrs Moule being reinstated at Purley.

After Councillor Cox had put the case for Mrs Moule and Cllr A J Lawrence seconded the matter of the position of the Borough representatives was raised. The chairman stated that they could speak but not vote.

Cllr Petrocockino, who represented Purley, attacked the way Mrs Moule had put her case in her written representations to members of Council. He said there were several parents in the village who would refuse to send their children to school if she were there. There was a great deal of support for Mrs Moule from members of the Council however the general feeling was that while an injustice had been done it would be neither practical nor

politic to reinstate her. The main wish was to see that a similar case would never occur and that suitable employment could be found elsewhere for Mrs Moule.

After considerable argument the original motion was withdrawn and the Council approved:- *That this Council expresses a wish that the Education Committee, should opportunity offer, sanction Mrs Moule's appointment to a post similar to that which she has recently held.*

The Issues

The debate raged over a wide number of issues, of which the chief were:-

Whether a public board were obliged to act with humanity as well as with the letter of the law.

Whether the County Council should have intervened.

Whether it was in the interests of the children that Mrs Moule should remain.

The role of the NUT.

Whether it was right to punish someone without first giving them an opportunity to defend themselves.

Whether it was right to punish a mother for the sins of her daughter.

The Aftermath

A detailed account of the incident appeared in 'The Schoolmaster'. Mrs Moule was supported financially by the NUT for some time after her dismissal but she never took up another post in Berkshire. She left Berkshire in September 1908 to live in Farnham.

At their meeting on 17th February the Managers appointed Miss E M A Mulford as the new teacher to take over on 1st June at a salary of £37-10-0 (c)

Miss Harris took over as headmistress in 1909, but she too did not stay long. The Rector was drowned in the Thames in December 1914. Some unkind people thought it a punishment for the way he had treated Mrs Moule.

Bibliography

- 97 History of Berkshire County Council
- a The Schoolmaster
- b Hansard
- c Berks CC minutes 1908 (220 and 454)