

Nigel Richardson

*Thring of Uppingham: Victorian Educator*

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Headmasters occupy a lofty perch in British public schools and in their Canadian equivalent, independent private schools. While occupying that exalted position in Victorian times, they were hailed for their 'superior style' and achieved what historian David Newsome once described as 'godly' and legendary status. Most of the nineteenth century English headmasters, in reality, presided over a mighty small kingdom and few went on to become household names. In his fascinating 1977 book, *The Public School Phenomenon*, Jonathan Gathorne Hardy put it best: "Remove them from the exaggerating memories of the tiny subjects in their kingdoms (i.e. their Old Boys)—and how they dwindle."<sup>1</sup> That may explain why relatively few biographies have appeared assessing the lives and impact of these mostly forgotten Victorian school leaders.

Two of the English headmasters who do live on in infamy are Thomas Arnold of Rugby and Edward Thring of Uppingham. If Dr. Arnold personified the "Titan" of Victorian imperial athleticism, Thring is best known for his more humble, paternal, and humanistic ways. Twelve years after Arnold left Rugby, and only thirty miles away, in 1853, Thring assumed the headmastership at Uppingham, a small, out-of-the-way market town in England's East Midlands. For thirty-four years, from 1853 to 1887, he transformed a struggling grammar school of twenty-five boys into a formidable boarding school of 300 boys recognized for its high standards throughout England.

In spite of Thring's singular success at Uppingham, he remained, until recently, much in the shadows of Arnold, widely regarded as the most influential educator of his day. Much of that notoriety can be attributed to Thomas Hughes classic novel, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. With the renewed interest in the social lives of boys and the popularity of revisionist scholarship, Edward Thring is attracting more attention. Since 2007, three new works have appeared to rescue Thring from his relative

obscurity. Following up on his 2009 study, *Typhoid in Uppingham*, focusing on the ravages of its 1875–77 typhoid epidemic, Nigel Richardson has now produced this full and finely crafted biography, *Thring of Uppingham: Victorian Educator*.

Thring emerges in Richardson's biography larger than life as a fiercely dedicated man of "singular strength" (xi), but a kinder and gentler version of the forbidding English Victorian headmaster. The author is definitely an insider with an intimate knowledge of his subject and the ethos of Thring's Uppingham. After teaching history at Uppingham for eighteen years, Richardson served as Head of the Perse School (1994–2008) in Cambridge, and as Chairman of the HMC (Headmaster's and Headmistresses' Council), founded in 1869 by Thring. His Ph.D. research centred on Uppingham's typhoid outbreak of 1875–77 and that stiffened his resolve to take on the full scale biography.

Richardson's *Thring of Uppingham* is a traditional 'old school' biography demonstrating the continuing value of scholarly works capturing the life and times, character and circumstance, of influential men and women. Just as rescuing and building Uppingham became Thring's life's work, this biography appears to have become the author's. Over 350 pages, we are swept up in Thring's life journey, covering virtually every twist and turn in impeccable detail.

As a former Canadian independent school headmaster, this book not only struck a chord but brought back a few vivid memories from my twelve years striving to steer the ship, fend off the governors, and keep the faculty on side. Surviving for 34 years at Uppingham was, in and of itself, a herculean achievement, especially while battling against intransigent governors, mounting debts, and the gradual creep of governmental control over the English schools. It also involved feats of courage and strength, such as moving the whole school to Borth in Mid-Wales for one year to escape the typhoid, and then returning after securing vitally important improvements in Uppingham's drainage and water supply.

The most fascinating sections of Richardson's biography for Canadians are those explaining his peculiar encounter and somewhat quixotic long distance relationship with George Parkin, the Canadian headmaster and imperialist. In 1873–73, Thring met Parkin, only briefly—in Winchester, Uppingham, and Ben Place—while the young New Brunswick-born educator was studying at Oxford. It was a strange pairing, as Richardson notes: "A large difference in age separated them, together with the breadth of the Atlantic Ocean. Nonetheless, they developed a strong, multi-faceted friendship" (273).

Thring took Parkin and his young wife under his wing, sharing his and their personal experiences with depression. The English headmaster saw in George Parkin a certain spirit of independence and passion for a cause. Thring, according to Richardson, identified strongly with Parkin as someone who needed to "pace himself" (273). When Parkin lost his father in 1881, Thring drew a lesson from his own experience seven years earlier: "There is the sense of being left behind with no barrier between oneself and one's own departure. Too often the last link is snapped which bound the family together." In his letters to Parkin, he could also be stoic and insensitive. When Parkin was upset over losing two children in infancy, he advised

that it was part of 'God's plan' and possibly "a purifying source (to) the work you are engaged" (274).

Thring and his protégé, Parkin, maintained a trans-Atlantic correspondence for nearly fifteen years. As a headmaster, Thring empathized with Parkin's many frustrations in trying to establish a high-quality boarding school near Fredericton, New Brunswick. Parkin soaked up Thring's advice and shared his "scorn for utilitarian theories of education" and his staunch resistance to "the sterile conformity so beloved by examiners and bureaucrats" (275). When Parkin was invited in 1877 to become organizer of the Imperial Federation League, his English mentor advised him to be wary of "temptation and glitter" (275). It is clear from Richardson's biography that Thring shared and nourished Parkin's passion for the idea of Imperial Federation, described as "a loose union of like-minded states" which might "ultimately supersede the British Empire" (276).

The renowned English headmaster gradually came to not only trust Parkin, but ready to entrust him with assuring his legacy. In the mid-1880s, Parkin was so poorly paid that his New Brunswick governors allowed him to supplement his income through freelance journalism. In a glowing review of Thring's *Theory and Practice of Teaching* (1883) in *The Nation*, he described Thring as "my master" and praised his "abhorrence of bureaucracy" and "intuitive understanding of the child's mind" (277). After Parkin began reprinting and widely distributing Thring's speeches and pamphlets across North America, the two collaborated on a full-length profile of Uppingham for the November 1886 issue of *The Century Magazine*, based in New York City. That led eventually, after Parkin's appointment as Principal of Upper Canada College, to Parkin's final tribute to his master teacher, an 1898 "official" life and letters biography, for many years the standard work in the subject.

In taking on Thring, Nigel Richardson essentially builds upon on the pioneering work initiated by George Parkin well over a century ago. Much like Parkin before him, Richardson challenges critics such as Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick who deride Thring's personality-driven 'enthusiasms' and label him the 'King of Boys.' Shunning the competitive athletics of Rugby School, Thring saw himself doing "God's work" and believed that, in Michael Holroyd's apt phrasing, every boy, 'ordinary' or 'brilliant,' deserved "equal and full attention."<sup>2</sup> Despite his undoubted success in building Uppingham, he was fiercely loyal to his boys, staunchly independent of the state, and an establishment outsider (to the end). We now have a definitive biography that takes a generous, full and fair measure of this influential, but underappreciated, Victorian educator.

## Notes

- 1 Jonathan Gathorne Hardy, *The public school phenomenon, 597-1977* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 86.
- 2 Michael Holroyd, *Basil Street Blues: A Memoir* (London: W.W. Norton, 2011), 30.