



## VERE FOSTER – 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY HISTORY THROUGH THE LIFE OF ONE MAN

### INTRODUCTION

This course recognises that the best way to learn history is to look for information yourself rather than just reading about it. It provides a framework, the life of one remarkable man of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and from that invites you to follow up on a person, place or event which most interested you and to share the information you find or the opinions you form. It is suggested that you read through the summaries of every unit then select for further study one topic which most interests you.

The course is interactive, allowing discussion online. It is centred round a website (<http://verefostee.info>) where participants can interact by:

- Posting new information found;
- Posting opinions on a discussion page

Alternatively you can just read through or use the topic within a history group in your own U3A

### COURSE CONTENTS

Introduction (this unit), including a Summary of the life and deeds of Vere Foster

Unit 1 – His family background

Unit 2 – His early career and first trip to America

Unit 3 – Assisted emigration scheme

Unit 4 – Assistance to schools and teachers

Unit 5 – Copy books

Unit 6 – Later years

Unit 7 – Conclusion

### STUDY MATERIALS

You are not asked to read through text books but if you want to check details, see:

- McNeill, Mary (1971) *Vere Foster 1819-1900: An Irish Benefactor*, David & Charles. Newton Abbot
- Colgan, Brendan (2001) *Vere Foster, English Gentleman, Irish Champion, 1819-1900*, Fountain Publishing, Belfast

However, to set the scene, an interesting starting point would be to watch the film “The Duchess” (2008) which relates the story of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, played by Keira Knightley, the relationship between her, her husband and Vere’s grandmother, Lady Bess Foster, later to become Duchess of Devonshire.

Then, to give a flavour of the man, it is suggested you read the script of a talk which Vere Foster delivered in 1879 (<http://verefoster.info/travels-in-america/>) in which he relates his travels through America and the various characters he meets en route.

Other information and references can be found at <http://verefoster.info> and it is hoped that this will develop as information is submitted.

## **HOW TO POST MATERIAL OR COMMENTS**

Go to <http://verefoster.info> and click on **Contacts** on the top menu. Submit your information or comments which will be checked and you will be emailed when your submission is posted.

## **HOW THE UNITS ARE STRUCTURED**

Each unit starts with a few paragraphs containing the bare bones of the subject. Next there are a number of suggested discussion or research points and/or requests for more information.

### **SUMMARY OF THE LIFE AND DEEDS OF VERE FOSTER**

In short, Vere Foster was an Anglo-Irishman of aristocratic background (the Foster family, Bishop Hervey, Duchess of Devonshire). He gave up a diplomatic career to address the poverty he found in Ireland, recognising that there was too little land to support the population and he set about assisting emigration to America.

He helped fund around 25,000 girls to emigrate! He made no distinction for religion, thereby crossing both sets of clergy, and he saw that if he helped girls they would send money back to bring out other family members whereas men might use their money in other ways. He checked the progress of his protégées and in the course of this he travelled through America (an early Alistair Cook), meeting some interesting characters en route (Abraham Lincoln, Oceola, John Boyle O'Reilly).

After emigration, he then turned his attention to education. He was appalled at the state of schools in Ireland, the treatment of teachers and the lack of and poor quality of the equipment available to them, so he personally funded the building or upgrading of more than a thousand schools, organised teachers, shamed landlords for their lack of support and set out an education plan. He recognised the importance of good handwriting when applying for jobs and addressed that through producing a series of copy books, writing, drawing and painting, which many U3A members will have used.

In addition to all that he was a best selling author. He wrote "The Two Duchesses" about the life of his grandmother, produced five issues of "Vere Foster's Penny Emigration Guide" which sold 100,000 copies, while sales of his copy books numbered in millions throughout the English speaking world. Finally he turned his attention to raising money for Belfast Royal Hospital, before dying impoverished in 1901.

The core of the course involves the life of Vere Foster but the objective is to provide participants with topics and interests which they can follow up and invites them to form views on what traits could have turned a boy from a privileged upbringing to become an altruistic man.

## TIMELINE

1819	Birth of Vere Foster in Copenhagen
1830-34	Eton
1834-38	Turin
1838-40	Christ Church, Oxford
1840-42	Audit Office, London
1842-43	Attache in Rio de Janeiro
1845-47	Attache in Montevideo
1846-51	<i>Great Famine in Ireland</i>
1848	VF's father, Augustus, dies
1849	VF and his brother Frederick tour schools and workhouses in Ireland
1849	Student at Glasnevin Model Farm
1850	First sponsored emigrants go from Ardee
1850	VF sails to America on "Washington"
1850-51	VF spends 10 months travelling all over North America
1851	<i>Passengers' Act 1851 passed</i>
1850-57	VF makes various trips to America
1852	First issue of Vere Foster's Penny Guide to Emigration
1858	Vere's brother Frederick dies
1858	VF makes a first offer to fund schools
1859-63	VF visits 1,400 schools
1860	<i>Abraham Lincoln elected President</i>
1865	First Vere Foster Copy Books produced
1868	First issue of the Irish Teachers Journal
1868	Establishment of the National Teachers Association
1870	First Vere Foster National Competition in Writing, Lettering, Drawing and Painting
1875	VF elected to the Board of the Royal Hospital, Belfast
1876	He makes 9,000 calls to possible hospital donors
1877	VF sells his rights in the copy books to John Ward
1877	Makes new offer to upgrade schools, listing over 600
1881	Back to America to try to raise funds for emigration
1900	Vere dies virtually penniless in Belfast

## FOOTNOTE

This course is the outcome of a Shared Learning project involving participants from a number of U3As in Northern Ireland, Active Retirement Ireland, with the support of the Public Records Office for Northern Ireland (PRONI).

## UNIT 1

### **FAMILY BACKGROUND AND UPBRINGING**

Vere came from a privileged background, the youngest of three sons of Sir Augustus John Foster and Albinia Hobart.

The Fosters had extensive lands in County Louth in Ireland where they lived relatively quietly and dabbled in Irish politics. However, life became a little less quiet when, in 1776, John Thomas Foster (Vere's grandfather) married Lady Elizabeth Hervey. Lady Elizabeth was the daughter of "Earl Bishop" Hervey, the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Bristol, from a family noted for eccentricity, who became the Bishop of Derry in Northern Ireland. Bishop Frederick Hervey was one of the most flamboyant characters of his day, among whose amours is said to be Emma Hamilton, of Lord Nelson repute, yet he found time to travel throughout Europe and to leave his mark on the life and infrastructure of Derry.

Having previously travelled through Europe with her father, Lady Elizabeth found life on the Foster estate rather dull and eventually abandoned her husband and two sons, Frederick and Augustus, to



embark on a life which was to lead her to become the Duchess of Devonshire, as documented in the film "The Duchess".

Initially she stayed with a relative in Bath until she was befriended by the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire and joined their circle. Lady Bess, as she became known, and Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, nee Spencer from Althorpe, spent eighteen months travelling round Europe before returning to England where she became the Duke's mistress, bearing him two children. Despite this, she and the Duchess remained friends until Georgiana's death in 1806, after which Bess married the Duke and, after his death, spent her remaining years in Rome. Vere was to write about his grandmother in "The Two Duchesses".

<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924028003618#page/n9/mode/2up>

Despite her abandonment of him and separation for fourteen years, her son Augustus (Vere's father) was greatly fond of her and they corresponded regularly throughout their lives. Augustus became part of the Devonshire set at age 16 after his father died, before becoming a diplomat, his career including spells in America, Denmark and Turin. Before he left for America he had cherished hopes of marrying Annabella Milbanke but on his return she rejected his proposal and was married to Lord Byron instead. (Good move?) However he soon became enchanted by another young woman, Albinia Hobart, with whom he fathered three sons, Frederick, Cavendish and Vere. In 1840, aged 60, he bought for his retirement Brownsea in Poole Harbour, or Branksea Castle as the mansion was known, where, in a bout of depression, he slit his throat on 1st August 1848.

Vere's mother, Albinia Hobart, had, like her future husband, experienced a disrupted childhood. Her mother died when Albinia was aged somewhere between five, when her younger brother was born, and thirteen when her father remarried in April 1802, his second wife being Janet MacLean of Coll. Shortly after his second marriage G.V. Hobart was appointed Governor of Grenada and sailed there

with his new wife, leaving the children in England, but the Governor soon contracted yellow fever and died. Albinia appears to have been left in the care of Lady Stuart who described her as her “*dear niece and adopted child the gentle delicate Albinia*”.

Vere was born in 1819 in Copenhagen where his father was British Minister and lived there until the age of five when his father was appointed British Minister to the Court of Sardinia in Turin. In Turin the Fosters mixed with the Italian court of the day, being particularly friendly with the Cavours. Little is known of Vere’s childhood but at the age of eleven he went to Eton (1830-34), apparently not distinguishing himself as there is no trace of his time there except for reports in family letters, then to Christ Church, Oxford (1838–40), which he left without taking a degree.

This course considers whether Vere’s exceptional altruism is the result of nature or nurture. There is little in his background to suggest that he had inherited concern for his fellow man, though the Fosters were generally considered good landlords. The Earl Bishop was respected for his care of his diocese and for his religious tolerance and both he and Vere’s mother exhibited the non-conventionality which appears to be a trait of the Hervey family (Marquesses of Bristol, Ickworth House). His upbringing included much travel throughout Europe and this must have shaped his outlook to some extent.

<b>FATHER</b>	<b><u>SIR AUGUSTUS JOHN FOSTER (1780-1848)</u></b> A native of County Louth in Ireland A career diplomat in Europe and America Rejected suitor of Lady Byron Cut his throat in Branksea Castle after a bout of insanity
<b>PATERNAL GRANDFATHER</b>	<b><u>JOHN THOMAS FOSTER (1747-1796)</u></b> Member of the Irish House of Commons 1776-1783
<b>PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER</b>	<b><u>LADY ELIZABETH HERVEY (1758-1824)</u></b> Daughter of the 4 <sup>th</sup> Earl of Bristol – the “Earl Bishop” Hervey Later “Bess”, Duchess of Devonshire
<b>MOTHER</b>	<b><u>ALBINIA HOBART (1788 – 1867)</u></b>
<b>MATERNAL GRANDFATHER</b>	<b><u>GEORGE VERE HOBART (1761-1802)</u></b> Son of 3 <sup>rd</sup> Earl of Buckinghamshire Governor of Grenada 2 <sup>nd</sup> marriage to Janet MacLean of Coll
<b>MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER</b>	<b><u>JANE CATANEO</u></b> Died when Albinia was a child

## EDUCATION

ETON COLLEGE            1830-1834

CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD 1838-1840

TURIN

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS OR RESEARCH TOPICS

- Does the fictionalised “Lady Bess” do her justice?
- What were the duties of a British Minister at the various courts of Europe?
- What was life in Eton like in the 1830s?

## UNIT 2

### EARLY CAREER AND FIRST TRIP TO AMERICA

Vere's first job was in the Audit Office where he spent three years before joining the diplomatic service and serving as attaché at Rio de Janeiro (1842–3) and at Montevideo (1845–7), where he met Giuseppe Garibaldi, then commanding the Uruguayan naval flotilla.

On his return from Montevideo, he drifted, for some time attached to the British Embassy in Brussels, but, according to McNeill (pp 45-46), he was not suited to a diplomatic career and his brother Frederick reported that *"Vere seems inclined to settle in County Louth and become agent"*. By this time his father had died (1848) and his elder brother Frederick had taken over ownership of the family estate at Glyde Court, Ardee, County Louth in the north-east of what is now the Irish Republic.

At that time Ireland was in the midst of what became known as "The Great Famine" when about a million people in Ireland are estimated to have died of starvation and epidemic disease between 1846 and 1851. While potato blight was a contributory factor there was sufficient food in Ireland at the time to feed the population but this did not reach the western counties which bore the worst impact. (The cause of this, and other, famines is a subject in its own right).

In the midst of the famine years Frederick and Vere undertook an exploratory tour of Cork, Kerry and Dublin visiting schools and workhouses and the new model farm at Glasnevin, a trip which seems to have shaped both brothers' ideas on the future. Frederick determined to become a resident landlord and became convinced that in education, particularly agricultural education, lay the answer to Ireland's poverty. Vere gave up his idea of being the agent at Glyde but resolved instead to *"take up my residence in Ireland, in the hope of making myself useful by falling in with any practicable scheme for giving increased employment to the people, and for providing against a recurrence of similar destitution in the future. Wages of hired labourers on farms were then usually only from £3 to £6 a year, and of girls only from 5s to 15s per quarter, and in seven workhouses which I visited there were 115,000 paupers. Considering that it was as natural and desirable for young people to emigrate as for young bees to swarm, I soon became interested in the subject of emigration"*. (<http://verefoster.info/travels-in-america/>)

Glasnevin must have impressed Vere for, next, in 1849 aged 30, he enrolled for a year as a non-resident student at the Model Farm where he *"sat on hard benches listening to lectures on animal husbandry, the principles of land drainage, the rotation of crops and so forth"* (McNeill, p.50). At the same time he begun work on his first project, that of assisted emigration. The year's course at Glasnevin had not finished when Vere personally arranged for the emigration in 1850 of forty girls from Ardee and Tallanstown, in County Louth, to America. Their character had to be endorsed by a local doctor, clergyman or other responsible person, before he paid their fare, bought food, bedding and clothing for their journey and gave them money to tide them over till they found work. In return for this the girls had to undertake to send back part of their savings to pay for other members of their family to follow them.



Then later that year, accompanied by Mr Ward, one of the teachers from Glasnevin, Vere boarded the American sailing ship “Washington”, bound for New York with approximately one thousand passengers. The purpose of the visit was to check the employment and life opportunities in the New World, before he set about the process whereby he was to help around 25,000 Irish girls to find new lives.

However this trip was to have significant consequences. Conditions on board the ship were atrocious as detailed in full in a letter from Vere, nominally to his brother Frederick but intended for general publication (McNeill, Appendix 1 or <http://jubilation.uwaterloo.ca/~marj/genealogy/ships/washington.html>), including sadistic cruelty, physical abuse, no rations being distributed for a week, overcrowding, extortion. The abuse he suffered on this trip affected Vere’s health for the rest of his life – and he was more privileged than the steerage passengers. Vere’s letter upset authorities in New York and Liverpool and, when he was accused by a Liverpool newspaper of being a spy, Vere replied that he *“would bear with pleasure any odium attached to that appellation if my insight into the management of that vessel shall have proved in any degree conducive to a remedy to a serious public grievance”* (McNeill, p61). Despite all the huffing and puffing, the matter was raised by a Select Committee in Whitehall and the Passengers’ Act 1851 was enacted – Vere Foster’s first significant achievement.

#### **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS OR RESEARCH TOPICS**

- ❖ What might Vere have done in the Audit Office in 1839-42?
- ❖ What other examples are there of formal teaching in agriculture in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century?
- ❖ What did the Passengers’ Act 1851 achieve



## UNIT 3

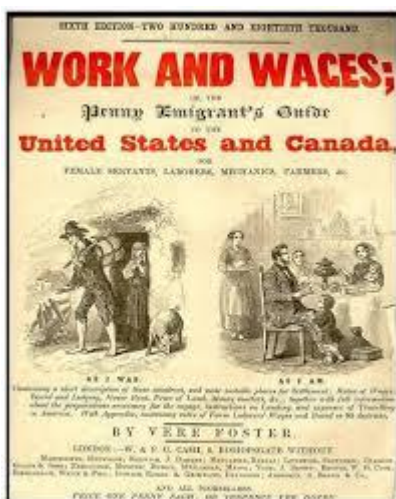
### VERE FOSTER'S ASSISTED EMIGRATION SCHEME

After recuperating from the effects of the voyage and activating for improvement of conditions on emigrant ships, Vere began, in February 1851, the second part of his enterprise, namely a ten months' trek alone through practically all the states then constituting the Union, " *in order to make every possible inquiry regarding emigration – the employment, wages, and opportunities awaiting emigrants, where they should go and when they should arrive, and, no less important, how they should behave*". (McNeill, p. 65). Details of this trip are described in a fascinating talk which Vere delivered in Belfast in 1879 (<http://verefoster.info/travels-in-america/>) though, as he says, the tales are drawn from a number of trips which he made during the 1850s.

After a spell in Washington, he went South through the Carolinas and Florida and on to New Orleans, everywhere making enquiries as to employment. From New Orleans he took the emigrant route, up the Mississippi by boat as far as St Louis and St Paul and up to Canada. He spent a night on Grosse Island where in the year 1847 twenty thousand immigrants had died of "ship fever" or typhus. During this trek he must have endured conditions which would have taxed even the fittest. For example, in Alabama he travelled for nineteen hours in an enclosed carriage over rough tracks, afraid like his eight fellow passengers "lest we should get our faces smashed by the violent jolting and plunging of the carriage".

During his travels he reported back in a letter to *The Farmers' Gazette* that five thousand labourers were needed immediately for the Pennsylvania railroad, thousands more for that from Mobile to Chicago. He advised emigrants against "sticking like glue in the large cities" and told where wages were best, which crops could be raised. He sent out a questionnaire to contacts throughout America asking about which jobs were available in their area and what help there would be for new immigrants to find jobs and lodging.

From the information thus gathered, back home in Ireland in September 1852 he printed a four page pamphlet entitled *Work and Wages*. Sold for a penny, the booklet was revised five times and had a total circulation of 100,000 throughout Britain (Colgan, p.58). See the text of the first issue at <http://verefoster.info/vfs-penny-guide-to-emigration-to-america/> . In it he makes a case for emigration to America rather than to Australia or New Zealand, comparing the cost and time of



travel, employment opportunities and the price of land. He quotes shipping and rail prices, including baggage allowances, allowing the emigrant to decide which route to take; he gives advice on the best time to travel. And, most important, he recommends trustworthy agents to trust and gives contact details for Irish Immigration Societies. He recommends the items to take along and their cost. This booklet must have fired the enthusiasm of many a poor would-be emigrant who must have had little knowledge of what would await them in the New World.

His next step was, in 1852, to establish the Irish Female Emigration Fund, later the Irish Pioneer Emigration Fund, to

assist *“the emigration to North America of one able-bodied member of each family (in most cases a woman), specially selected on account of her poverty, good character, and industrious habits, with the expectation that she herself will take the remaining members of her family out of poverty.”* Though he wrote to a large number of his contacts in Britain, the bulk of the money in the fund was provided by himself and his brother Frederick.

As well as raising funds for the girls, Vere arranged employment for many of them, drawing on the information gathered and contacts made during his 1850 trip. During the remainder of the 1850s Vere travelled across the Atlantic on numerous occasions, gathering information, making contacts and checking on the progress of the girls he had helped. His description of his visit to Abraham Lincoln and his family, who employed one of Vere’s protégées, can be read at <http://verefoster.info/travels-in-america/> . In a report of the emigration fund Vere tells how, in a trip in 1856, he *“ascertained that £1,058 sterling have been remitted by 75 out of the 92 emigrants sent in 1852, and 97 additional persons have been sent for by them”*.

Not everyone was pleased with the emigration, however. Landowners found their supply of cheap labour dwindling and there was mistrust of a Vere’s motives and he described a 1856 dockside scene: *‘Many of the farmers were mad at me for reducing the supply of labourers and servant girls; and alternate entreaties, threats, and force were used to prevent many of my party from embarking, cries being got up that my intention was to make Protestants of them; that they were to be bound for a term of years; to be sold to “the blacks”, to the Mormons, etc etc’*. A fuller account of the dispute can be read at <http://verefoster.info/louth-emigrants-1856/> .

McNeill (p.100) reports that during the years 1850-57 Vere defrayed the entire expenses of 1,250 female emigrants from Ireland to America, as well as a much smaller number of men and boys and must have spent out of his own resources at least £10,000 on emigration in seven years. In addition he organised the collection and distribution of money from the Emigration Fund and helped emigrants in a number of ways and it is generally accepted that directly and indirectly, through a multiplier effect, he enabled around 25,000 girls to start new lives in America.

### **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS OR RESEARCH TOPICS**

- ❖ Draw up and cost a plan to take your family, in 1852, from Liverpool to one of the cities mentioned in VF’s leaflet.
- ❖ Trace advice similar to that in “Work and Wages” which others provided for emigrants to Australia and compare the issues and costs.
- ❖ Trace any newspaper stories of the 1860s describing what emigrants to the New World might find.
- ❖ Can you trace the fate of any of the girls funded by Vere?

## UNIT 4

### VERE FOSTER'S ASSISTANCE TO SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

Upon the death of his brother Frederick in 1858, Vere turned his interests back to Ireland where Cavendish, the second of the three brothers, had inherited Glyde Court. He, however, took little interest in it, remaining in his rectory in Essex, and relied on Vere to sort out Frederick's affairs. Before his death Frederick had written to Vere asking him to give up emigration and join with him in "attending to the national schools". Following the tour of Ireland which Frederick and Vere had made in 1849, both had taken a keen interest in education and Frederick saw this as the new outlet for his energies. He wrote to Cavendish " (McNeill, p.103): *"I intend to lay out the money which I have inherited from Frederick in building as many new school houses as are needed in our county"*. He concluded *"I hope you may approve of giving me a site for the purpose at Philipstown"* but Cavendish was not of the same mind as his brothers and replied that he saw no reason why a Protestant landlord should be expected to donate a site for a school to be attended predominantly by Catholic children.

Schools at that time, as now in Ireland, were mainly divided along religious lines. There had been various categories of Protestant schools, including one with the daunting title of "Schools of the Association for Discountenancing Vice and Promoting the Knowledge and Practice of Christian Religion" while Catholic schools, commonly known as "hedge schools" until 1831 were usually sod or stone huts or converted cattle sheds. In 1831 the National Board of Education was established and the 10,000 or so "hedge schools" were renamed "National Schools". All National Schools were vested or controlled by the Board and expected to have teachers and children of both religion. Religious education would be provided in each school, but outside school hours, by the respective clergymen. The key issue was that they would be state funded. Eventually, after much protest, the churches for the main part conceded their position and accepted the "all religious denominations together" legal position in return for funding but, where possible, parents sent their children to a National School under the local management of their particular Church and a power struggle was waged between the various churches and the Board.

Vere entered the fray, first in County Louth, finding to his horror the basic conditions of the National Schools, most without privies, school furniture, maps or fireplaces. He offered to defray one third of the costs of building twenty new schools and the total cost of a teacher's house near each of them but his offer was rejected by both the Catholic Church and the Board of Education.

As was his way, he then went on a fact finding trip round Ireland, at the same time updating those he met with details of emigrants from their area and getting testimonials for continuing emigrants, and concluded that each vested school should be funded from three sources, namely the state, local taxation and the local landlord. Having already entered conflict with the churches, he now tackled the landlords *"who are, of course, mostly absentees..."* by naming and shaming them, highlighting their at best pitiful contributions, saying *"one would expect that they would be the most liberal promoters of the education of the children of the labourers and tenants on their estates, the sweat of whose brows is the foundation of their wealth"*. (Minutes of National Board of Education, 4/2/1859)

He then initiated a country-wide programme of school improvement and during his lifetime is believed to have improved or built some 2,000 school-houses at his own expense. He would take his

own measurements, arranged for workmen to lay wooden floors, mend roofs and windows, supply desks and other apparatus. Despite this Vere remained a champion of the concept of state funded education and entered into a debate on the relative merits of the English and Irish systems of the day (<http://verefoster.info/vere-foster-on-national-schools/>).

Not content with that, Vere addressed the low standards of teaching in many schools, the poor remuneration of teachers and lack of resources. At this time teachers were appointed without any accepted form of agreement, being largely at the mercy of the school “manager”, generally a clergyman or representative of the landlord. Their tenure was insecure and, though paid a salary by the Board, this was basic and was expected to be supplemented by voluntary contributions which seldom materialised. Vere tackled this situation head on when, in a speech delivered to the National Association for the Social Sciences in Belfast in 1867, he set out his vision for improving education and the lot of teachers in Ireland, one worthy of the most radical of modern NUT officials in more recent times, advocating higher salaries for teachers, for teachers’ houses to be provided and for wages to be paid monthly rather than quarterly, also recommending a teachers’ journal or magazine to improve the status of teachers and improve the efficiency of their teaching.

Two of his recommendations were quickly put in place. The first number of *The Irish Teachers’ Journal* appeared in January 1868, including a letter from Vere Foster reiterating his vision for education in Ireland (McNeill, pp 156-7). Second, while there had been a number of teachers’ groups, there was no national organisation and this lack was soon remedied when the National Teachers’ Association was established in August 1868 with Vere appointed its first President.

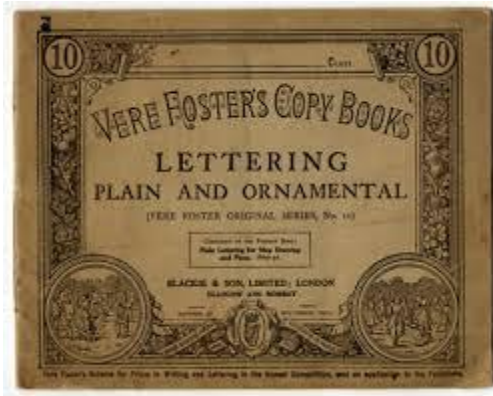
Vere’s contribution to education in Ireland at the time, as to his approach to assisted emigration, is well summarised in a Report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland (1859, p.222) - “It would appear that, with him [VF], the knowledge of a national defect is the precursor to the adoption of a remedy.”

### **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS OR RESEARCH TOPICS**

- ❖ Can you trace what happened to Cavendish and his family.
- ❖ How were your local schools funded in the 1860s?
- ❖ Compare Irish education at that time with education in your area.

## UNIT 5

### VERE FOSTER COPY BOOKS



Although the preceding units have dealt separately with emigration, Irish schools and teachers, these projects were all going on at the same time. While he travelled round the country looking at and funding improvements to schools Vere was also screening applications for financial help for would-be emigrants and passing on information about those he had helped, and he continued to make trips to America. However there was an additional outlet for his organisational ability and philanthropy, the objective of improving writing in Irish schools. He was convinced that this proved a

problem in finding employment at home and in America.

He decided that the materials used in the teaching of penmanship were inadequate and sought the help of Lord Palmerston whom Vere remembered, from his early career in the Foreign Office, having issued a circular to all staff that they must write in copperplate. They determined that Vere should make a study of the copy and writing books then in use and that he should then design a new set. With typical thoroughness he made tours of Europe and America, consulted educationalist, teachers and school inspectors then produced a draft set. With amendments from those consulted, including Lord Palmerstone, by then the Prime Minister, the first Vere Foster Writing Copy Books were presented for approval by the Commissioners of the Education Board. They agreed that the copy-books "are deserving of a trial" and in 1865 placed an order for 50,000 copies, at £6.4.0 per thousand, to be sold to teachers at one penny each.



The first "Palmerston", series, consisted of thirteen books, starting with "Strokes, Easy Letter and Short Words" working up to proverbs (<http://www.fulltable.com/VTS/m/tm/aa/w/a.htm>) and sentences. Each book had the strokes and sentences written along the top line of each page which children then copied on to the lines provided below. Unlike previously used copy books, these used high quality paper, had a decorated cover and contained useful information about how to keep the books clean and how to maintain nibs. The cover bore the motto "A

*Nation's Greatness Depends upon the Education of its People*". The books were a great success, meeting with almost universal approval though it was noted that "*female pupils, especially those whose parents are in comfortable circumstances, object to the roundness of style*" (Reports of Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, 1866, p233). The copy books for older children included an introduction to business studies, correspondence, book-keeping and Civil Service Official Style Writing (<http://www.fulltable.com/VTS/a/artman/wr.htm>).

The books were widely used throughout the English speaking world and annual sales were counted in millions. Complaints were made to the House of Commons that there was a monopoly in the provision of copy books to schools. Demand outran the capacity of the original Dublin printer and Vere decided to move the printing to Belfast where he had befriended John Ward, a partner in the printers Marcus Ward & Co. and he himself took up abode in Belfast.

The series were extended and a new set of “Drawing Copy Books” was produced (<http://www.fulltable.com/VTS/m/tm/aa/ww/a.htm> ). While present day artists will decry the teaching method, the books were widely approved and John Ward urged Vere to add “Water Colour



COPY BOOKS”. Since they had been prepared by eminent artists and involved expensive printing methods, the latter were not a commercial success but individual prints from them are usually to be found on sale at Amazon and EBay.

Nevertheless the writing and drawing books brought in significant profits which Vere, typically, ploughed back for the benefit of pupils by introducing in 1870 “Vere Foster’s National Competition in Writing, Lettering, Drawing and Painting”. These were open to pupils of either public or

private schools throughout the British Empire and in 1872 there were over 2,000 entries from Ireland alone.

The writing of bank clerks also came under Vere’s scrutiny and there exists in Vere’s writing a letter he drafted for the directors of the Ulster Bank to issue to all bank managers “*deploring a deteriorating tendency in the character of writing and figuring in the service*”. The directors of the Northern Banking Company sent supplies of copy-books to all their branches requiring that they be returned “written up” within three months (McNeill p. 148).

However in 1876, a lengthy dispute began between John Ward and his brothers over the rights to the printing of the copy books. In the following year, 1877, Vere sold all his rights to the copy books to John Ward for £3,000, on condition that their printing remain based in Ireland, whereafter John Ward sold on to Blackie & Son, then a small company, which continued to print what amounted to 192 different titles which were used in schools well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **SUGGESTED QUESTIONS OR RESEARCH TOPICS**

- ❖ Check your local antiquarian bookshops for copies of the VF books.
- ❖ Trace examples of where the books were used in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?
- ❖ Download a page from <http://www.fulltable.com/VTS/a/artman/wr.htm> to see if you can copy the Civil Service writing style.

## UNIT 6

### LATER YEARS

#### SCHOOL BUILDING

Vere's involvement in upgrading schools continued for the rest of his life though for some years much of his time had been taken up by the series of copy books (Unit 5). In 1877, after he had sold his involvement in the books, he returned to the task of upgrading school buildings. First, he made up a list of 619 schools with unsuitable premises and offered to subscribe £30 each towards the local contributions needed before the National Board would award building grants.

#### SECOND PHASE OF ASSISTED EMIGRATION

In the 1870s there was much political unrest in Ireland, fuelled by evictions and starvation. Charles Stewart Parnell, while on a fund raising trip to America, received a letter from Vere, stating "*I desire to invite your attention to assisted emigration as the most practical and certain mode of, not only temporarily but permanently, relieving the present poverty and ever-recurring distress in the West of Ireland*" (McNeill, p.190). He went on to say that he himself was too old to resume his previous labour but urging Parnell to set up an assisted emigration scheme and offering to subscribe £2 for each young man or woman, to a maximum of £15,000. Parnell was not interested, or politically inclined to support emigration as a solution to the problem, so Vere had to take up the mantle again. Since his personal assets had virtually all gone, he launched an immense begging project which was less popular than he had hoped though requests for assistance flooded in.

In 1881 he went back to America to try to raise funds but there too faced opposition on the basis that assisted emigration was a ploy by the English to substitute for expelled Irish. However by the 1890s demand for female labour in the United States was lessening and legislation was introduced to ensure that all immigrants had some capital, thus virtually ending assisted emigration schemes.

#### BELFAST ROYAL (VICTORIA) HOSPITAL

<http://verefoster.info/vere-foster-his-contribution-to-the-health-and-medical-care-of-people-in-belfast/>

When Vere took up residence in Belfast in 1867, in inexpensive lodgings and not the mansions of his upbringing, he entered into the activities of the rapidly growing city. His particular concern being the Royal, now Royal Victoria, Hospital. This was his next "Great Cause" and was to last for the remaining 30 or so years of his life, though, as far back as 1860 he had been instrumental in improving the unhealthy and overcrowded conditions of poor people who lived in Belfast. He was one of the "public spirited" men who provided better housing for working class men in the city, especially those in the old, one storey, insanitary "mill houses" prevalent at that time. He had also provided funding for the provision of Day Nurseries for the children of working mothers.

The Royal at that time was a voluntary hospital and depended on the goodwill of individuals and organisations for its funding, and therefore short of funds. Patients were asked to contribute to the

cost of their treatment if they could. In 1875 Vere Foster was elected to the board of the Royal and set about the task of raising funds. He offered to become an “honorary” collector in a large district in Belfast, in 1876 making as many as 9,000 personal calls to possible donors and recruiting more than 1,000 subscribers. Not only that but he always matched the amount he collected with an equal sum from his own pocket and donated half of the proceeds from the sale of his Copy books to the hospital’s funds. This was a sizeable amount since the books were still being sold in vast quantities throughout the world, especially in America and the English colonies. He had no qualms about asking the public to donate for this excellent cause and could be seen, on many occasions, sitting on the pavement in Donegal Square appealing to passers-by to support the Hospital Fund.

At a meeting of subscribers on the 16th November 1896 Professor Whitlaw outlined the need for a new hospital, emphasizing the fact that Belfast had only 470 beds whereas Dublin, Edinburgh and Glasgow had twice as many per head of population. He was strongly supported by Vere Foster in this appeal. Typically, it was Vere who had carried out the research which enabled Prof. Whitlaw to be so explicit in citing these comparative and detailed statistics. A campaign was launched to raise funds for a new hospital a few weeks later and in only 8 months the target of £100,000 was reached, demonstrating the enormous efforts made by all concerned. Sadly he was not to live to see the opening of the new hospital in 1906.

#### **DEATH**

Vere died in cheap attic lodgings at 115 Great Victoria Street, Belfast on 21 December 1900, virtually destitute, having given away all his money.



## UNIT 7

### CONCLUSION

Congratulations to those who have continued to this Unit!

You will have covered a lot of history in the process, even if you did not succumb to the temptation to deviate along side issues.

Finally, you are asked to consider the question of what turned a man born to riches and the higher echelons of society to become a philanthropist and benefactor of the poor in so many ways. The scene is set in: <http://verefoster.info/the-making-of-an-altruistic-man/>

**NOW PLEASE ADD YOUR COMMENTS TO THE WEBSITE.**