

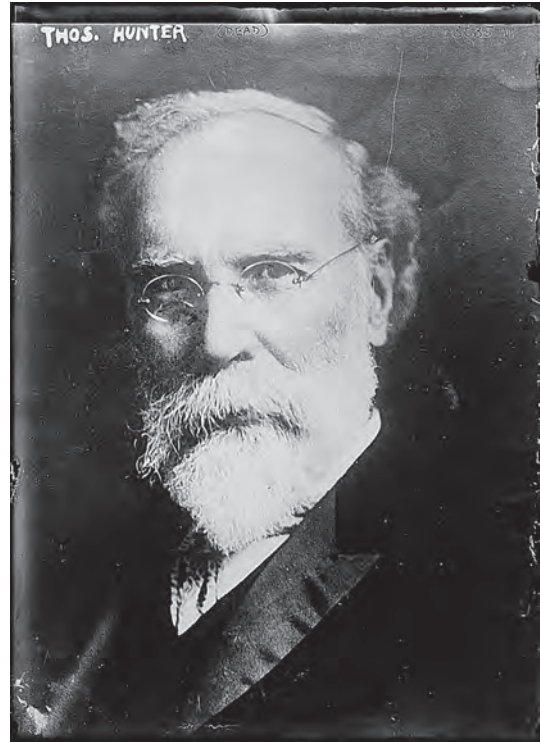
Thomas Hunter—Visionary Irish Immigrant Educator

BY GEOFFREY COBB

We remember the achievements of soldiers, politicians and business people, but far too often great teachers and their important educational legacies are soon forgotten. Irish immigrant Thomas Hunter today is in danger of becoming such a forgotten figure, but this great educator's achievements and his monumental contributions to public education must not be consigned to oblivion. Hunter's many accomplishments include not only becoming the founder of the first free teachers college in the United States, but also the president of the first publically supported college for women in America. However, perhaps his greatest contribution to schooling was taking a child's fear of being beaten out of public education for good.

During his lifetime (1831–1915) Hunter achieved fame as a pioneering educator and was held in universal esteem. By the end of his life, Hunter was acknowledged as a pedagogical giant who had profoundly transformed public education, leaving an indelible educational legacy in New York City. The normal college he founded on Park Avenue in Manhattan was renamed Hunter College in his honor in the year before his death. Yet today, this poor Irishman's significant achievements and amazing biography are largely unknown, even by the tens of thousands of students who have graduated from the institution he founded. In the 1980s, the author of this article studied history under the gothic arches of Thomas Hunter Hall, never imagining that the school's founder was an Irish Republican, or that Hunter had done so much to improve and expand public education in New York City. Hunter's legacies, in advocating for free public education, especially in establishing publically funded female higher education, are still highly significant today, more than a century after his death.

Photo:
Thomas Hunter in a photograph taken between 1910 and 1915. Born in a small coastal town in Co. Down, he immigrated to the United States in 1850 and first found employment in New York as a teacher of drawing. During his lifetime here he became an important leader in educational progress, particularly in school discipline and the education of female students. In 1860s and 1870s he led the way to create New York's first Normal College for teachers, which ultimately became Hunter College, today one of the major constituents in the City University of New York. Courtesy of Library of Congress.



Hunter's students excelled in many different disciplines, thanks in part to his outstanding teaching. In gratitude, they formed an organization called "Hunter's Old Boys" composed of his former students at Public School #35 in lower Manhattan. Recalling the excellence of his instruction, these men worshiped him long after they had grown into adults. In 1913, three hundred of his former students, many now older men and women, gathered to present their former teacher with a loving cup in honor of the great educator who had inspired them more than a half-century before. One of his students assessed the profound impact Hunter had made on the city saying, "There is no man who has ever lived in this city who has left a more indelible mark upon the manhood and womanhood of this city." (Hunter, p.78)

**Photo:**

Fishermen and other workers on the docks in Ardgrass, Co. Down, around 1910. When Hunter was born there in 1831, his father worked as a ship's captain. The town was located on a peninsula in the Irish Sea and, historically, had been an important port and commercial fishing center. By the late 1830s, the harbor had been developed with construction of a pier and lighthouse. Two years after Hunter's birth, the Dublin Penny Journal described Ardgrass as "picturesquely situated on the shore of a little harbour of the same name. Courtesy of HistoryinPhotos. Blogspot.com.

FROM COUNTY DOWN & THE SEA

When Hunter was born in Ardgrass, Co. Down, in 1831 no one could have imagined that he would become a teacher, let alone a giant educator on a different continent. Born into a humble Church of Ireland family with Scottish ancestry, Hunter's people on both sides of the family were sailors, and young Thomas was raised along the windswept coast with the sound of the sea in his ears. His father, a sea captain, was a stern disciplinarian who instilled obedience into his children through beatings. His mother, née Norris, passed away when Hunter was only six years old. Frequently at sea, Hunter's father entrusted care of his son to aunts and uncles who placed little value on schooling. Thomas, though, became literate thanks to his maternal grandmother who used the Bible to teach him how to read.

There was little money in the Hunter family thanks to the profligacy of his paternal grandfather who had served as an officer in the British forces during the rebellion of 1798.

The family farm suffered neglect during his grandfather's military service, and the officer contracted a mountain of debt, which he was unable to pay, so he ended his days confined to a debtor's prison.

Hunter was not the first member of his family to leave Ireland for America. His maternal grandfather, Norris, a sailor, was impressed into the British navy during the Napoleonic conflict, but he deserted at his first opportunity. Hunted as a fugitive by the authorities, the young man was spirited out of Ireland and made his way to Maryland where an older brother was established in shipping. Quarreling with his brother, young Norris enlisted in the fledgling American Navy. When his ship was seized by a British man-of-war and searched for British deserters, the young Irishman was in danger of being hanged. Only by falsely claiming New York City birth did Hunter's grandfather escape the hangman's noose. At the end of the conflict, he returned to Northern Ireland, becoming a ship's captain.

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It is one of the great ironies in Thomas Hunter's life that the great Irish educator thoroughly despised the Irish educational system that schooled him. In fact, it was his total contempt for the cruelty and stupidity of his teachers that made Hunter an educational reformer who was determined to educate children humanely. Hunter's father had remarried after the death of his mother, and young Thomas did not get on well with his stepmother. Consequently, at age twelve, he was sent off to an Episcopal parish school in Dundalk where bullying by other students and savage beatings by the masters were routine.

An extremely bright and sensitive child, Hunter held a deep innate belief in justice, and he railed against the many injustices committed in Irish schools. He developed a strong aversion to the masters whom he described as brutes who flogged students for the mere pleasure of inflicting pain. He later recalled that some of them were like demons and others half idiots, yet despite the indiscriminate cruelty that was a hallmark of his schooling, the barbarities he endured never robbed Hunter of his sense of fairness and justice. Indeed, the brutality only sharpened his outrage at the primitive savagery of the schoolmasters. In response to being called impertinent by a teacher after insisting he had answered a question accurately, he said, "If it be impertinent to ask justice then I am impertinent." (Hunter, p. 7)

Chosen to teach a class of children barely younger than he was, Hunter only used the rod as a last resort, while demonstrating an innate talent to teach. When students realized he was averse to meting out physical punishment, they rebelled and challenged his authority. He reluctantly employed corporeal punishment, but he still found beating children repugnant. Hunter frequently stood up to bullies, and by the age of sixteen he had grown strong both physically and mentally to deter any aggression. Boarding school was not only an education in letters but, more important, an education in the affairs of men. Much of the shrewdness he

showed later in life in New York was a result of his insights into human relations he acquired in the world of Irish boarding schools.

At age fifteen, Hunter won a competition to enter a desirable school in Santry, near Dublin. He proved highly proficient in math and drawing. He found the school, however, deficient in teaching literature, but through his own reading he developed a love of English literature and a facility in writing.

SYMPATHY FOR THE OPPRESSED

In his autobiography Hunter claimed that his sympathy for the oppressed began in boyhood when he heard Daniel O'Connell speak. Hunter went to see him in clear violation of school rules. A huge throng had appeared to greet the beloved Catholic emancipator, and an old woman Hunter encountered gushed, "I've come down from the mountains and I've seen him – glory be to God. I've seen the liberator afore I die." (Hunter, p. 237) He credits O'Connell with awakening his empathy towards suffering people, stating, "I have always had the greatest sympathy for the oppressed races, the Poles, the Hungarians, the Irish and the Negroes." (Hunter, p. 237) Following his arrival in New York, Hunter soon realized that free public education was the great stepping-stone for these downtrodden peoples to move upward.

One curious omission in Hunter's autobiography is any mention of the potato famine raging in Ireland during his teenage years. Hunter lived through the worst years of the Great Hunger, yet he never wrote about it in his memoir. Nevertheless, Hunter's innate and strong sense of equity made him aware of the great wrongs British imperialism was inflicting on Ireland. Despite his Protestant background, Hunter spoke out against the injustices imposed on Ireland's Catholics. Hunter became a fervent Irish patriot, reading the writings of Irish Republicans like Thomas Davis, John Mitchel, and Thomas Francis Meagher. He became an ardent believer in the Young



Ireland movement and an advocate of physical force Republicanism. His radical beliefs would soon force him from his native land.

In Ireland, Hunter was hired as a teacher, but he soon began to pen anonymous letters in support of Irish nationalism. He also wrote caustic articles for the *Nation* newspaper, under a pseudonym, in favor of disestablishing the Church of Ireland. When his Republican sympathies were discovered by his employer, it was a foregone conclusion that Hunter could no longer teach in his native land and that he would have to emigrate. The head constable of the police privately informed him that the authorities in Dublin were deeply angered by his last letter in the *Nation* and were hungry for retribution. In 1850, the young impoverished Irish educator left Ireland bound for New York City.

ARRIVAL IN NEW YORK CITY

Hunter arrived in New York with little money and without any acquaintances. Initially, he could not find work, but his belief in America and its republican system buoyed him in spite of his poverty. Hunter later stated “I loved America, I loved it before I ever saw it. I became a citizen with all my heart and soul.” (Hunter, p. 109) A man with a cosmopolitan worldview, Hunter was ideally suited to become a New Yorker and teach its socially diverse students.

Still bitter about his experiences in Irish schools, Hunter had resolved to give up teach-

ing and start a new profession, but ironically the only job he could find was teaching drawing. He was hired at a school Public School # 35 on Thirteenth Street, a school he would later make famous. Hunter stated that he had one qualification for teaching: he had a large amount of sympathy for children—“I liked the boys, and they liked me.” (Hunter, p. 77) He was given a class and soon proved himself a gifted educator who could command respect and control a large class, even though he was only nineteen years old.

Hunter differed from many other teachers in one respect. He had an aversion to beating his students and, even when children misbehaved, he was averse to whipping them. His dislike of corporeal punishment was not only considered highly unusual; it was even regarded by some a mark against him in his professional ambitions. The boys in the school, though, quickly grew to love him and they excelled under his tutelage.

Hunter wanted to become a principal because then, as now, teachers were poorly paid, and the job was not esteemed. By 1857, when a vacancy for the principal of Public School # 35 emerged, Hunter had proven himself a superior classroom teacher, but his foreign birth proved a hindrance to being appointed principal. Many of the committee members who would choose the next principal of the school were Know-Nothings who fiercely opposed the idea of having a foreign-born principal. Additionally, many of the Know-Nothings

Illustration:

Drawing by nineteenth-century American illustrator Edwin Austin Abbey depicts a school master threatening a student. Thomas Hunter found such situations repugnant and considered physical punishment by teachers a sign of pedagogical weakness. As principal of New York City's Public School 35, he abolished corporeal beatings from his institution, a move considered radical at the time. Hunter believed that elimination of children's fears of being beaten in school was an important achievement. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

in power mistakenly believed that Hunter was a Catholic, another mark against him. A man of Republican principals, Hunter believed that he should not have to announce his religion in order to secure a job for which he was eminently qualified. Hunter despised the Know-Nothings and their bigotry, stating there were two elements in the Know-Nothings: one intelligent and unscrupulous, and the other narrow-minded bigots who believed the Pope was coming over the ocean to rule America. (Hunter, p. 116) Hunter regarded their bigotry as un-American, but he knew that they were powerful enemies who could block his becoming principal.

Hunter must have been a charming man. He made friends easily, and he had a politician's knack for collecting favors. He soon turned the board in his favor and used political connections even to force the Know-Nothings to vote against their prejudices for his candidacy. Shockingly, he was elected unanimously. The following year the Know-Nothings succeeded in removing all the other foreign-born principals, but the wily Irish immigrant survived.

AS SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

When Hunter became principal he inherited a rattan cane to thrash the boys with, but the cane brought back the horrible memories of his childhood and he was disgusted by the thought of using it. Hunter felt that only weak or unwise teachers needed to use corporeal punishment, and he decided it had no place in his school. He instituted a policy that would make him loved by children, but seen as a threat by many traditional educators. He abolished corporeal punishment at Public School #35, which became the first school in the city not to beat its students. His opponents predicted that scholarship would suffer and order would break down. At first, there was some breakdown of discipline as some children took advantage of the new policy to misbehave, but Hunter instituted a series of non-violent disciplinary rules, replacing corporeal punishment with a

system involving moral discipline. Detention, suspension, and expulsion—not the cane—became the consequences for insubordination or violation of the written rules. The new discipline system succeeded.

Despite predictions of disaster, the level of scholarship at his school remained high, and the school became extremely popular with boys. Thanks in large part to Hunter's example, New York City became one of the first American school systems to abolish corporeal punishment. His school soon gained a reputation for academic excellence and even rich parents who could afford private tuition chose to send their sons to Public School #35. One of those affluent students who came the school was Charles Evans Hughes, who went on to become governor of New York, secretary of state, and a supreme court justice. Hunter is often credited with being the first advocate in American education for removing corporeal punishment from schools. His system of non-violent punishments was eventually adopted throughout the country.

Hunter was also a believer in hiring female teachers, considered a radical practice for an elite academic institution before the Civil War. He soon began a policy of hiring women to teach at his school. Hunter believed that the ability to teach was innate in both men and women, and that he could recognize the qualities in good teachers in both genders. His female teachers justified his faith in them, becoming highly successful educators esteemed by the young men they taught.

Hunter served as principal during the Civil War, and his memoir provides an insight into how New Yorkers perceived the conflict. Many of his students enlisted in the Union Army, and Hunter recalled with pain that one of his brightest students was killed at the battle of Chancellorsville and the best student he ever taught became a colonel before losing his life at Missionary Ridge.

During the Civil War, Hunter was a witness to one of the most terrible events in New York City history, the draft riots of



July, 1863. He reflected on the violence in his autobiography at some length. Hunter believed that the unfairness of the draft, created three months earlier by the federal Enrollment Act, was to blame for the riots that swept Manhattan. He stated “I am certain that this riot began in the righteous indignation on the part of the laboring men against what they considered injustice on the part of the government.” (Hunter, p. 137) He singled out the provision of the Act that allowed rich men to escape the draft by paying \$300 as especially unfair, identifying it as a major reason for the start of the violence. When he realized that violence would occur, Hunter closed his school early and headed home. Hunter dressed in common clothes and went out to observe the mob. He was shocked and sickened by what he observed. Hunter watched in abject horror as a well-dressed neighbor who was a banker was beaten by a mob and stripped to his trousers while being robbed of everything. But things would grow far uglier. He reacted in horror as thousands of drunken lower class people engaged in an orgy of beatings, robbery, and arson. Hunter witnessed the infamous burning of the colored orphanage on Fifth Avenue and Forty-third Street.

He claimed that there was a nefarious outside hand behind the violence: southern instigators. He believed opposition to the draft had been fomented by rebel emissaries and claimed that the workingmen who started the riot took no part in the cruel murders of black citizens. Hunter decried the orgy of killing and condemned the murderers of African-Americans, stating that “Dastardly murderous boys and their drunken mothers were the fiends who disgraced humanity.” (Hunter, p. 137) In his memoir, though, he makes no mention of the large Irish role in the riots.

MOVING IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION

Hunter was a man of great ambition, and he was not content to remain principal. In 1866, he was elected assistant superintendent of the city’s schools and set about trying to make sure that competent educators ran schools everywhere. Another man with more conventional views might have bided his time and eventually become superintendent of schools, but Hunter moved in a far riskier direction. Hunter took a headmaster’s position in a newly formed all-female school, while becoming an advocate for the higher education of women, a radical idea in America in the late 1860s.

Illustration:

Drawing of Hunter College building in 1874 when the school known first known as the New York Normal College. It was founded by Thomas Hunter and created by the New York State Legislature during a national movement focused on improving teacher training. Hunter was a moving force for the institution and served as its president for thirty-seven years. By the late 1880s, the College had incorporated a kindergarten, an elementary school, and a high school. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

Until the latter part of nineteenth century, public education was intended only for young men. New York City had no free academy for girls above age twelve. A few girls from wealthier families were educated in private high schools, but there was a movement to open up higher education to females that was coming to fruition. In 1869, New York City approved the creation of a normal school for female teacher training. The “normal school” that later evolved into Hunter College was created as the first publicly financed high school intended exclusively to train women in the art of teaching. There was a good deal of resentment against the school. Many felt that it was wrong to use public funds to educate women—and that women had no business in education.

Thomas Hunter became a powerful early advocate for both female higher educa-

tion and for a women’s role in teaching. The normal school’s first classes were held on February 14, 1870, and the school opened with seven-hundred women in its student body. The name of the institution was soon changed by the New York State legislature to the “Normal College of the City of New York,” which became the first free college in the United States possessing the power to grant degrees. Graduates were to be entrusted with the education of future citizens, and were thus expected to uphold the highest moral and ethical standards. The school admitted only single women at first. When women married, it was expected that they would leave teaching to concentrate on their duties as wives and mothers.

Although first recruited only to help establish the new normal school, Thomas Hunter was eventually given the reins as principal. In that role, he set the standards

Photo:
Hunter College student Helen Campbell who studied radio science at the school during 1917. By 1920 the College had the largest enrollment of women students among all municipally-funded colleges in the United States due, to a large extent, to Thomas Hunter’s earlier advocacy on behalf of higher education for women. At the undergraduate level, the College remained an institution for women until 1964, although men had been admitted to some graduate programs beginning the 1920s. Courtesy of Library of Congress.





of what a full education entailed as well as the methods used to achieve that purpose. Hunter believed that the best teachers were highly educated people who were well-read and excellent writers. He made sure that the courses taught in the Normal College were rigorous and that the students who entered the school were academically capable. Applicants were carefully screened.

Ever a master at winning political battles, Hunter had to use his cunning and many connections to defend the new school from outside interference. He also sought a proper home for the school. During the first three years of its establishment, the school was located in a dingy Fourteenth-street building, Hunter knew that there were open lots uptown where a new school building could be constructed. Thanks to his reputation and string pulling, he obtained for the school a site on Park Avenue and Sixty-ninth Street (because the leader of Tammany Hall who owned those lots would profit handsomely from their

sale to the city). Hunter worked with architects on the design for the new building. Work began in summer of 1871, and in March 1872 a cornerstone was laid.

HUNTER AS PRESIDENT

During Hunter's more than three decades as president, the school became known for its impartiality regarding race, religion, ethnicity, financial, and political favoritism. It also won a reputation for its relentless pursuit of higher educational opportunities for women, its selective entry requirements, and its rigorous academics. The school's population grew, as did its reputation for excellence.

In 1888, the school was incorporated as a college under New York State law with the power to confer bachelor-of-arts degrees. This led to the separation of the school into two schools: one for students pursuing a four-year degree following the original normal school curriculum to become licensed teachers, and one for aca-

Photo:

Photograph shows the Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi, who served as a member of the Italian War Commission to the United States in 1917, with a group of Hunter College students. The students were enrolled in the radio course for women wireless telegraphers during World War I. Marconi was celebrated for his contributions to long distance radio transmission and for his radio telegraph system. To the right of Marconi is Edna Owen, director of the Hunter College course. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

demical students seeking a bachelor-of-arts degree in non-teaching professions. After 1902, the less demanding normal course of teacher preparation was abolished and only academically traditional college courses were taught.

Hunter retired his presidency in 1906 and passed away in 1915. His funeral service at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine filled the huge building. His pallbearers included all the state's most important educational officials. He was eulogized for his more than six decades of service to public education that profoundly transformed New York City. Generations of accomplished women owe their education to his unwavering belief in female education.

Hunter left a body of academic work on pedagogy and school management. Historians of American education rate his work, both practical and theoretical, with that of the great John Dewey. But Dewey is widely remembered, while Hunter is often forgotten and not given the credit he deserves as a transformative figure in public education.

Though started solely to educate teachers, the Normal College of the City of New York expanded its scope and aims through more than a century. Evening classes serving the working population of the city were begun in 1917, and graduate studies for both women and men were initiated in 1921. By 1920, Hunter College had the largest enrollment of women of any municipally financed college in the United States. It began one of the first American schools of social work. In 1930, it merged with Brooklyn College to form the City University of New York. The college became co-educational in the early 1960s, but still many of its most accomplished graduates are female. Hunter is the only American college that can claim two female Nobel Prize science laureates amongst its graduates. Writers, artists, politicians, and luminaries have graduated from the school.

There is little mention of Thomas Hunter and his achievements by the Irish-

American community in New York. It is a curious and glaring omission. Did his Protestantism make some reluctant to embrace him, or did his role in public education create dismissal or even resentment in Catholic educational circles? Such questions, though interesting, are beyond the scope of this article. But one fact remains clear. Thomas Hunter made huge contributions to education in New York City that deserve far greater recognition.

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