

A HISTORY of the SCOTTISH PEOPLE

THE SCOTTISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM 1840 - 1940

W W Knox



This is Chapter 1 of 10. The others are:

Summary of Economy & Society, Employment, Health, Housing, Income, Leisure, Migration, Religion, Transport

CONTENTS

1. EDUCATION IN THE 19th CENTURY	
1.1 THE 19TH CENTURY PARISH/BURGH SYSTEM	1
1.2 THE LIMITS OF THE PARISH SYSTEM	2
1.3 THE EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) ACT 1872	3
1.4 SECONDARY EDUCATION	4
1.5 THE UNIVERSITIES AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY.	5
1.6 THE TEACHING PROFESSION	6
2. EDUCATION IN THE 20th CENTURY	
2.1 PRIMARY EDUCATION	7
2.2 SECONDARY EDUCATION	8
3. CONCLUSION	8

1 EDUCATION IN THE 19th CENTURY

1.1 THE 19TH CENTURY PARISH/BURGH SYSTEM

Scotland has long enjoyed an international reputation as historically one of the best-educated societies in the world. The foundation for this reputation was laid in the 17th century and was the result of Calvinist emphasis on reading the Bible. Putting men and women in touch with the word of God was seen by the Scottish authorities and clergy as of paramount importance. To achieve this goal schools paid for by the Church of Scotland and local landowners were established in all rural parishes and burghs by an Act of Parliament in 1696. These educational establishments were run by the Church and were open to all boys and girls regardless of social status. The democratic nature of the Scottish system so impressed the 18th century writer Daniel Defoe that he remarked that while England was a land 'full of ignorance', in Scotland the 'poorest people have their children taught and instructed'. The openness of the Scottish system ran all the way from the schoolroom to the university. A talented working class boy the 'lad o'pairs' through intelligence and hard work and by utilising a generous system of bursaries was able to gain a university education, something largely unthinkable in England in the 18th century.

1.2 THE LIMITS OF THE PARISH SYSTEM

Historians until very recently have supported this traditional view of the democratic nature of Scottish education, but the work of TC Smout and RD Anderson in particular has challenged this orthodoxy. However, they were not the first to find fault with this complacent view of the Scottish system. In 1843 George Lewis published a book - 'Scotland a Half Educated Nation' - pointing to the growing failure of the Scottish system to cater for the educational needs of an expanding population, particularly in urban areas. Indeed, as early as 1818 it was estimated that around two-thirds of school children were receiving an education outside the public system in what were known as private 'adventure' schools, in which the parents bore the cost and the Church had no say.

The situation was further complicated when in 1843 the Disruption occurred in the Church of Scotland leading to the formation of the Free Church and the establishment of hundreds of new schools. Another problem was the arrival of thousands of immigrants from Ireland for whom little, if any, education provision existed. The poverty of the Irish meant that many parents could not afford school fees nor raise the necessary funds towards teachers' salaries and school buildings. There were only thirteen Catholic schools in Glasgow in 1857 out of a total of 213. The quality of teaching in them was variable and generally inadequate, an unsurprising situation given that until the late 1850s Catholic teachers only received four to six months training.

A newspaper's description of St Mungo's RC School in Glasgow in 1856-7 gave a fairly typical example of the quality of Catholic education around this time: "The boys' school is ... in what seems to have been a weaver's shop, [set] on a sunken floor, ill-lighted, [and] low-roofed. The dingy apartment is swarming with children from 5 to 10 years of age." Catholic schools only offered elementary education, but, in spite of the limited quality, attendance was poor with only a third of Catholic children in Glasgow attending schools of any kind in 1861. Low attendance was also apparent among Protestant children, but not to the same extent as in the Catholic sector. In 1834 it was estimated that while a fifth of the population of Holland and a sixth of Prussia were at school, only one-fourteenth of the population of Glasgow and one-fifteen of Dundee were being educated. In Glasgow some 20,000 children were beyond the reach of educational institutions, and in the Highlands half the inhabitants could not write and a sixth could not read.

Twenty or so years later the situation had improved very little. In Glasgow in 1857 it was estimated that under 50% of the five to ten age cohort were receiving education. Even in the relatively highly educated north-east of the country two-fifths of children of agricultural labourers were said to be 'uneducated'. The poor record of attendance was the result of the continuing demand for child labour. A study of Clackmannanshire showed that the demand for child labour increased as a whole by 53% in the period 1851-1862. Poor parents sent their children to earn rather than learn. The situation, as TC Smout has remarked, 'was a mess' What did the 'half educated nation' learn while in school? The emphasis was placed on the 3 Rs - reading, writing and arithmetic. However, there were gender differences within this restricted curriculum. Boys in the Church schools received instruction in foreign and ancient languages, while girls were generally kept to domestic training. Teaching classics to girls

was seen as a waste of time since school and employment were commonly viewed as mere interludes on the road to marriage and child-rearing. Moreover, in Victorian times domestic service was the largest single employer of female labour, thus training in domestic economy for working-class girls was seen as necessary by the authorities.

In spite of the emphasis on rote learning and the 3Rs, the erratic attendance of children meant that the standard of literacy was not high. Work on Clackmannanshire shows that in 1834 2,249 were being taught to read, of which only 1,137 were also being taught to write. Among adults the situation was even worse. Of 80 criminal offenders, 21 could neither read nor write, and 37 could only read or write imperfectly. However, in spite of the inadequacies of the Scottish system, particularly in industrial areas with high concentrations of immigrants, literacy rates were far higher in Scotland than in England. The test of literacy was essentially a crude one: the ability to sign one's name on a marriage certificate. On this basis it was found that in 1855, 89% of Scottish males could sign their name compared with 70% in England and Wales. For women the figures were 77 and 70% respectively. There were, however, some regional differences within Scotland. In the majority of Lowland counties 90% of males could sign their names, and it was equally high in some Highland counties such as Argyll. By contrast, in the more remote parishes of the Highlands and Islands rates were significantly lower.

Although most children in Scotland were exposed to education, as we have seen the quality was variable and the attendance poor. Moreover, institutions such as the Church were finding it increasingly difficult to provide education for a rapidly growing population. Applications to the state for educational subsidies became increasingly common - a factor which led to state inspection of grant-aided schools - and it became apparent that the system would collapse without state aid. Various attempts were made in the 1850s and 60s to introduce a non-sectarian, publicly financed education system failed in Parliament due to the interference of English MPs afraid that a similar system in England would lead to the loss of the privileges of the established Church of England. However, a government-sponsored commission into the state of Scottish education in 1867 - the Argyll Commission - confirmed the views of the critics and the state was spurred into action.

1.3 THE EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) ACT 1872

The Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 laid the basis for the modern education system. The most immediate thing it did was to take control of education out of the hands of the churches, with the exception of the Catholic and Episcopalian churches, and place it in the hands of popularly elected school boards. A non-sectarian system of public schooling was established and subject to the general control of the Scotch Education Department (SED), based in Whitehall, London. It was not until the Scottish Office was created in 1885 that the SED had a measure of independence from the English Department.

A second consequence of the Act was to make schooling compulsory for children in the age group 5-13, although exemption was made for children ten and over who could prove that they had achieved proficiency in grade five of the

curriculum. The nominal leaving age was raised to fourteen in 1883 and education was free. By 1908 the system of exemptions was abandoned and precise entry and leaving dates were introduced. The 1872 Act was successful in providing a broad framework for a national system of education. Within thirty years of its passing illiteracy had been eliminated in both the Highlands and the Lowlands, and much was done to improve attendance rates.

In Glasgow, prior to the 1872 Act, only 60% of children ever attended school, and of these 10,000 were regular absentees; however, by the end of the 19th century schooling was universal with places for all children. With the exception of France, Scotland had more children in the age group 5-14 attending school than all other advanced European countries in 1910-11. In spite of this the legislation failed to address several important educational issues. Firstly, it dealt only with elementary education and had nothing to say regarding the provision of secondary education; secondly, the school boards were dominated by clerical and business interests and controlled from London, with the result that the new educational system did not reflect the wishes of the wider society or cater for their aspirations; and, finally, they did little to improve pupil/teacher ratios, particularly in poorer areas where class sizes were between 60 and 70. In Catholic schools the position was even worse with a teacher/pupil ratio of 1:150.

1.4 SECONDARY EDUCATION

Secondary education was the preserve of the Scottish middle classes in the 19th century and the 1872 Act helped perpetuate their dominance by failing to provide free education for the less well-off. In line with England the Scottish authorities had not regarded secondary education as a priority in the state system; the model of primary/secondary progression was not part of Victorian views on education. It was hoped that the system of middle class education would be preserved without state assistance. However, as Scotland lacked the numerous charitable endowments to be found in England, the solution to the financing of secondary education was found in charging fees to pupils. As a result, charitable institutions such as those run by Edinburgh's Merchant Company or the Heriot's Trust were turned into fee paying schools for the middle classes, in spite of opposition from the Edinburgh Trades Council. In addition to these schools came the academies, such as Ayr Academy, Montrose Academy, and so on, which were created in 1872 and were designed to give instruction in advanced subjects such as Latin, modern languages and maths.

In 1888 a Scottish leaving certificate was introduced for secondary pupils examined by university professors but it did little to increase the numbers in these 'higher class' schools. Even in 1892 when all elementary and most secondary education became free, and scholarships were more widely available, few working-class children were able to take advantage of the opportunity. Only just under 5% of pupils attended a secondary school in Scotland in 1897. The real priority for children from working-class backgrounds was to find work and begin earning a wage.

1.5 THE UNIVERSITIES AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY.

For a small nation Scotland was particularly well-endowed with universities, boasting five in the 19th century - a figure which included Aberdeen's Marischal and King's Colleges. The universities were considered to be national, public institutions and, therefore, less elitist than Oxford or Cambridge in England. Because of this they were said to be more open to working people and, indeed, 18.6% of the student population of Glasgow university in 1860 was from working-class backgrounds. The existence of a substantial number of working-class students has given rise to the view that universities in Scotland were more democratic and based more on merit than the class-ridden universities of England. The wider implication was that Scotland was a less class obsessed society than England. This view was expressed in George Davie's highly influential book 'The Democratic Intellect' (1961). However, Davie's views have come under fire in recent years, mainly due to the research of TC Smout and RD Anderson. Most of their criticism of Davie's thesis derives from their re-working of the statistical material contained in the report of the Argyll Commission of 1867.

The Commission inquired into the parental backgrounds of 882 matriculated students (25% of the total), and the evidence pointed to the fact that 200 students mainly from the ranks of skilled workers were attending university in Scotland. Although the figure seems impressive, the reality was that the son of a minister had a hundred times better chance of going to university than the son of a coal-miner. 117 sons of ministers, drawn from an occupational group of 4,205, were matriculated students as against 13 sons of miners, a work group of 46,190. Moreover, the rural poor, the majority of factory workers, the unskilled were unrepresented. Most working-class undergraduates tended to be older, frequently in the twenties, with very few coming straight from school. The survival rate, regardless of family background, was phenomenally low. Out of 3,122 arts students attending Glasgow University between 1861 and 1872, 36% stayed for only one session; 17% for two and only 47% stayed for more than two sessions. This pattern persisted into the later century.

At Glasgow University in 1889-90, out of 225 students taking the junior Latin class 200 failed. The quality of university education in Scotland was generally poor and inferior to that offered in England. The low quality was mainly due to the fact that there was no university entrance examination and, therefore, children could enter the system as early as fourteen or fifteen. Indeed, 29% of university students were in this age group in 1860, although this figure declined sharply after 1880. With an education little advanced on what could be had at secondary school many Scottish graduates had to go to England for higher training.

Things did improve in 1889 due to an Act of Parliament which transformed university education in Scotland from a system based on general arts to a more specialised basis of study. As a result, philosophy, which had previously formed the core of the arts degree, was made optional. Students were also forced to compete for bursaries and this acted as an unofficial entrance examination. The setting up in 1901 of the Carnegie Trust Fund (CTF) provided a further source of assistance and by 1930 70% of university students in Scotland were receiving awards from the fund. The numbers of students in higher education institutions

increased from 4,400 in 1830 to 6,000 in 1900, to 10,000 in 1938. At Glasgow University, working-class students increased as a percentage of the total, from 18.6% in 1860 to 24% in 1910. Most, however, were concentrated in the Arts. Medicine and the law were still the preserve of the middle classes; the chances of a male from the lowest social class from gaining a degree in law was 1 in 20,000 and in medicine 1 in 6,000. The situation also improved for females.

It was not until 1893 that universities opened their door to females. This was the culmination of a long drawn out campaign by feminists begun in the 1860s. In Edinburgh in 1869 a young woman - Sophia Jess Blake - successfully matriculated in the medical faculty. However, that event sparked off a wave of protest from male staff and students and resulted in the so-called Surgeons' Hall Riot in 1870, when male students attempted to prevent women from attending a lecture in anatomy. Women were viewed by the male professionals as a threat to their social and occupational status and sought to encourage female nursing and teaching as an alternative. Victorian views regarding women as solely wives and mothers thus intruded into education as they did in the job market and limited the advancement of women in Scottish society.

1.6 THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Until the 1872 Education Act teaching in Scotland was dominated by males possessing a university degree or a teaching certificate. Women were not prevented from entering teacher training colleges but had financial and other barriers put in their way. Nearly all male students received grants, but females had to finance their own training. Moreover, the subjects for boys included sciences, mathematics, Greek and the classics, whereas girls studied domestic economy, French and botany. The gendering of study was also reflected in the different career paths followed by the students on graduation: boys to tenured positions in parish or burgh schools; girls to insecure work in the voluntary sector. However, with the introduction of compulsory schooling in 1872 for children between five and thirteen the demand for female teachers grew rapidly and gradually the profession became feminised.

By 1911, 70% of teachers in Scotland were women, whereas in 1851 the figure was only 35%. This increase did not lead to equality between male and female teachers. The average salaries of certificated male teachers varied from £121 and £145 a year in the period 1872 to 1900, while female teachers received between £62 and £72. Catholic teachers were also unfairly rewarded, with male teachers in 1911 earning £44 a year less than their equivalents working for school boards, and female teachers £7 less. Prior to 1905 this was justified by the fact that the majority of women teachers were uncertificated, but after the SED had taken over the teacher training colleges of the Presbyterian churches this had less weight - 65% of female teachers were certificated. More and more male teachers fell back on the argument that as women were not the main breadwinners in the family they did not deserve to be paid the same as men. Indeed, women teachers were forced to give up the profession on marriage; something not remedied until after the 2nd World War.

Teachers in the elementary schools worked extremely hard for their salaries. With class sizes in poorer areas of around seventy, the problem of maintaining

discipline was immense and led to the extensive use of the tawse - a heavy leather strap. Classrooms were also cold and the learning regime tended to inhibit self-expression in favour of merely repeating the received wisdom of the teacher. In schools it was written that there 'should be sustained quietness and instantaneous obedience'. In spite of improvements, Scottish education in the 19th century was far from democratic and open. When the position of females is taken into consideration it is even less egalitarian. Moreover, since the system was controlled from Whitehall for a large part of the century its distinctive Scottishness must be called into question. At the elementary level children were receiving a poor standard of education as cost conscious school boards looked to economise in the provision of teachers, buildings and facilities. Secondary education had become the preserve of the middle classes, as had the universities. Even so, Scotland fared better in providing access to higher education for children of poorer backgrounds than England. Scotland had one university place for every 1,000 of the population, compared to 1:5,800 in England; in secondary schools the figures were 1:140 and 1:1,300 respectively.

2. EDUCATION IN THE 20th CENTURY

The period from 1900 to the outbreak of War in 1939 did not witness the same degree of change in the educational system as had occurred in the 19th century. However, there were important developments in the sphere of primary and secondary education. These changes did little to alter the class bias of education, but collectively they made important contributions to the creation of an all-encompassing modern educational system in Scotland.

2.1 PRIMARY EDUCATION

The early 20th century saw increased state intervention in education as schools came to be seen as an important agency of social welfare. The 1908 Education Act made parents responsible for their children's attendance, and compulsory medical inspection was introduced, as well as free meals for needy children. Because of the crisis about the nation's health sparked off by the poor physical quality of army recruits during the Boer War (1899-1902), greater emphasis was placed on physical training and military drill; the classroom and the Empire were inextricably linked. Education was given a prime role in the creation of future generations of soldiers and citizens.

The 1918 Education Act increased the comprehensiveness and the element of compulsion in the education system. The 987 school boards were replaced by 38 educational authorities; Catholic schools were brought into the state system; and the school leaving age was to be raised to fifteen - something not achieved due to economic depression and war until 1947. However, the Act did not resolve the question of what was to come between primary and higher education.

2.2 SECONDARY EDUCATION

The question which exercised the minds of those responsible for education policy in the 1920s and 1930s was this: in the face of growing demand should secondary education be provided for all, or only for some children? For the

policy-makers at this time children could be divided into two types: the academic child, destined for university and professional status; and the non-academic child who lacked the 'mental equipment' to benefit from higher education and was, therefore, destined for an industrial/manual occupation. The first solution was to create Advanced Divisions (ADs) in elementary schools to provide post-primary education. The standard of work was poor in these ADs, since the staff were not sufficiently qualified to go beyond the requirements of primary education.

The second response was to give all pupils secondary education; something which was enacted in 1936. However, to maintain the meritocratic system which had developed in the 19th century, the secondary schools were divided into three-year junior secondary schools, leading to no qualifications, and the five year senior secondary schools, leading to the leaving certificate and university entrance. Although these developments meant that proportionately more children in Scotland had access to secondary education than in England, it condemned the majority of the school population to the failure of early leaving. As late as 1951, and in spite of more educational reforms in the 1940s, 87% of young adults in the age group 20-24 were leaving school at age fifteen or younger. It was not until the introduction of comprehensive schools in 1965 that the inequality between senior and junior secondary schools was finally addressed. It also marked a shift in the fundamentals of educational philosophy away from equality of opportunity to equality of treatment of pupils regardless of family background or place of residence.

Although there remained differences in the quality of provision offered by schools under the comprehensive system a framework was provided which could address these variations. With the introduction of the 'O' Grade in 1962 the numbers going on to highers increased. As a result, the size of the university population began to grow from 5.1% of the age group associated with university entrance in 1962, to 17.0% in 1970. Females and young people from working class backgrounds benefited from the changes. The number of students in the latter category increased from one-sixth of the total university student population in 1868 to a quarter in 1961. However, it is still the case that social background to a large extent determines the level of educational attainment and this problem is one which policy-makers are continuing to grapple with.

3. CONCLUSION

Education in Scotland has been the subject of much myth-making as regards the openness of the system and the quality of provision. In the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, the educational system catered mainly for an elite section of Scottish society. Although the door to higher education was more open than in England, workers and their families, women and Catholics in general were excluded. For these groups, education was sparse and the quality poor. Legislation gradually improved the access of all groups to better education, but it was only after the introduction of comprehensive education in 1965 that attempts were made to provide adequate standards for all children in Scotland. Until then it is hard to disagree with the view expressed by TC Smout that: 'In the 20th century, Scottish education has been marked by the same attitude that branded it in the 19th, which regarded it as a matter of low social priority once the perceived needs of the middle classes had been attended to,

and once a channel had been opened for a limited number of working-class children to use secondary school and university as a means of upward social mobility.'

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, RD. 1983 'Education and Opportunity in Victorian Scotland' Anderson, RD. 1955 'Education and the Scottish People, 1750-1918' Corr, H. 1990 'An Exploration into Scottish Education' in Fraser, WH. and Morris, RJ. People and Society in Scotland Vol II, 1832-1914, pages 290-309 Hutchinson, H. 1971 'Church, State and School in Clackmannanshire, 1803-1872', in Scottish Educational Studies, Vol 3 pages 25-38 MacPherson, A. 1992 'Schooling', in Dickson, A. and Treble, JH. (eds) People and Society in Scotland, Vol III, 1914-1990 pages 80-107 Scotland, J. 1969 'The History of Scottish Education, Vol II, from 1872 to the present day' Smout, TC. 1986 'A Century of the Scottish People', 1830-1950 pages 209-30 Page 7