

The rise of educational concern in Scottish Presbyterianism & the Education Act of 1696.

In 1878 Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools wrote, 'The mass of the Scotch people are Presbyterians, and for these the national schools may be said to exist, just as the Roman Catholic and Episcopal schools respectively exist for these denominations. The public schools are to all intents and purposes denominational schools. Public and Presbyterian are practically interchangeable terms... the system is said to work well. Everyone is pleased, and the religious difficulty is solved'¹. Although many will lament the hollow nature of that opinion when applied to the situation today, this article will seek to show that Presbyterianism in Scotland has from its inception shown a healthy concern for the education of the young.

On 10 November 1483, two peasants, Hans and Gretha Luther gave birth to a son. The child grew up in the town of Eisleben, then at the age of fourteen he was sent to school in Magdeburg, and later to the University in Erfurt. In July 1505 this twenty one year old student, Martin Luther, entered an Augustinian monastery. Soon after his arrival at the monastery he began to show potential, in the words of Principal Lindsay 'Luther was beginning to show himself a good man of business, with an eye for the heart of things'². In 1508 he was made a Professor at the University of Wittenburg. A few years after his appointment, Luther was sent on a visit to Rome. Houghton comments, 'The visit to Rome was a landmark in Luther's life... at the end of his stay he had learned to see the city in another light. He was prepared to say, 'If there is a hell, Rome is built over it'³. God was raising up a servant of the cross, who would, deliver Europe from the thralldom of popery.

This great reformer later wrote, 'Even if there were no souls and there were not the least need of schools for the sake of the Scriptures and of God, this one reason would suffice to cause the establishment of the best schools everywhere, namely that the world needs accomplished man, and women also, for maintaining its outward temporal prosperity.'⁴. Even at the dawn of the Reformation there was a concern for the young.

The First Book of Discipline

By 1546 Luther died, and John Calvin was the dominant figure of the Reformation. Gospel light spread through the nations of Europe and with regard to Scotland, Row says, 'the Lord made his gospell and trueth to be more and more knowen, untill the tyme of the Reformation, whilk began in the yeare of God 1558'⁵. The difference between the spread of the Reformation in England and Scotland is quite marked, McCrie says 'In England the reigning powers took the lead, and the people followed, as they best might, in the wake of royal authority. In Scotland the people were

¹ *Report of Scottish Educational Department, 1878-79*, p.173. Op. Cit., Mechie S., *The Church and Scottish Social Development 1780-1870*, Oxford University Press, 1960, p.152.

² Lindsay, Principal T.M., *Luther and the German Reformation*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1935, p.40.

³ Houghton, S.M., *Sketches from Church History*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1980, p.84.

⁴ Clarke J., *Education in Scotland*, p.19. Op. Cit., MacInnes J., *The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland*, Aberdeen University Press, 1951, p.221.

⁵ Row J., *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1842, p.9

converted to the Protestant faith before the civil power had moved a step in the cause; and when the legislature became friendly to the Reformation nothing remained for it to do but to ratify the profession which the nation had adopted.’⁶.

As the Scottish Parliament met on 1 August 1560 they were presented with a petition for the abolition of Popery, according to Brown, ‘Parliament wanted to know what they were to put in the place of the Romish error. It was not their part to formulate a Confession of Faith. Knox and four of his friends were called on’⁷. This says Calderwood, ‘was gladelie undertaken, and within foure dayes after, this Confessioun following was presented’⁸. In December of the same year, 1560, Knox, six ministers and thirty four elders constituted the Supreme Court of the Reformed Church of Scotland. This assembly, at the Magdalen Chapel Edinburgh, devised the First Book of Discipline. Brown comments that it was useful in ‘setting forth the Presbyterian form of Church Government in its leading features. It was derived, as they are careful to state, not from Geneva or France, but directly from the New Testament’⁹.

Chapter 8 of this document deals with the rents and patrimony of the Church, and begins with the statement ‘Thir two sorts of men, that is to say, ministers [of the word] and the poore, together with the schooles, when order shall be taken thereanent, must be susteyned upon the charges of the kirk’¹⁰. The document continues to give direction regarding the establishment of schools, the payment of schoolmasters, and the provision for the teaching of Grammar and Latin in any town of size. Chapter 7, which deals more particularly with the establishment of schools and universities, instructs the magistrates in ‘upaland’ areas that there ‘must either the reader or the minister there appointed, take care of the children of the youth of the parish, to instruct them in the first rudiments, especially in the catechism’¹¹.

Thus Mechie can correctly assert, ‘The Scottish reformers believed wholeheartedly in education of both the old and young, and proposed that the support of a comprehensive scheme of education should be a charge on the patrimony of the Kirk.’¹². However, the translation of these aims into practice was less forthcoming. The parish heritors (landowners) and the clan chiefs viewed these visions of an educated populous with little favour, and the growth of schools was slow.

In 1639 the dioceses of Argyll and the Isles were united into a single Synod (the re-establishment of the Presbytery) and this Synod enacted a series of measures over the

⁶ McCrie T., *The Story of the Scottish Church*, Free Presbyterian Publications, Glasgow, 1988, p.40.

⁷ Brown T., *Church and State in Scotland 1560-1843*, Hodder & Stoughton, Edinburgh, 1891, p.5.

⁸ Calderwood D., *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1843, Vol. 2., p.15.

⁹ Brown T., op. Cit., p.8.

¹⁰ Steuart W., *Collections and Observations concerning the Worship, Discipline and Government of the Church of Scotland*, 5th Edition, Edinburgh, 1837, p.77.

¹¹ Steuart W., op. Cit., p.67. Note.. The Catechism referred to is that of Calvin.

¹² Mechie S., op. Cit., p.136.

next twenty years aimed at planting schools. MacKinnon shows that the Synod founded four Grammar schools, twelve English schools and a school on each of the following islands, Skye, Iona, Islay and Arran¹³. The slowness of expansion is demonstrated by the fact of a single school in Inverness, which served the vast Presbyteries of Inverness and Dingwall¹⁴.

The 1696 Act

Following the Church stand in support of education, the state finally accepted some responsibility in the education act of 1696. This directed that, 'in every parish of this kingdom, where convenient means may be had for entertaining a school, a school shall be established, and a fit person appointed to teach the same upon the expense of the parishioners, according to the quality and quantity of the parish.'¹⁵. This act left an obvious loophole, i.e. the phrase 'where convenient means may be had'. In 1696, a decade before its demise the Scottish Parliament passed a further act.

The education act of 1696 provided Scotland with its modern system. The act was not revolutionary. Meckie describes it as 'a repetition of an Act of 1696; but it contained a provision, calculated to make it more effective'¹⁶. MacInnes prefers to say 'the act of 1696 was, in effect, the Act of 1696 with the addition of a coercive clause.'¹⁷. The Act itself, ordered the minister and the heritors of the parish to provide a schoolhouse and to settle a schoolmaster who was to be paid between one hundred and two hundred merks per annum. This act, therefore, placed the Church in a strong position when faced with awkward landlords. However, it failed to provide the Universities and High Schools envisaged by Knox in the First Book of Discipline.

Conclusions

The Scottish reformers were instrumental in blessing Scotland with a system of education that aimed to provide for all regardless of social background. Drummond and Bullock comment regarding the First Book of Discipline that, 'it was intended to give a training in faith and character to every child, to inform his mind, to teach him to earn a livelihood, to make him a good citizen and an independent man, and to provide openings for an educational elite, whatever the social background.'¹⁸.

Throughout the following century educational endeavour faltered. The Highlands were particularly badly served by the established church and it fell to societies like the SPCK (Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge) to fill the gaps. An

¹³ MacKinnon D., *Education in Argyll and the Isles, 1638-1709: Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 1936, p.49. Cf., MacInnes J., op. Cit., p.222.

¹⁴ MacKay W., *Inverness and Dingwall Presbytery Records (S.H.S.)*, p.xlvii. Cf., MacInnes J., op. Cit., p.223.

¹⁵ McGillivray, *Home Life of the Highlanders 1400-1746*, ed., MacKay D., Glasgow, 1911, p.76. Cf., Scotland J., *The History of Scottish Education*, University of London Press, 1970, p.51.

¹⁶ Meckie S., op. Cit., p.137

¹⁷ MacInnes J., op. Cit., p.225.

¹⁸ Drummond A.L., Bullock J., *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843-1874*, St Andrews Press, Edinburgh, 1975, p.84.

Englishman, F. Hill, comments in 1836, 'Whatever may be thought of the sufficiency of this [parochial] provision for the education of the people at the time it was made (a century and a half ago), considering the scantiness of the population and the poverty of the country at the time, there can be no doubt that it is far more being adequate to present wants, and that the country now has ample means for enlarging and improving it... The provision for education in Scotland has by no means kept pace with the increase in population, and the growing demand for knowledge among the ranks of the people. Many thousands, we fear, are growing up in some towns without any education whatever...' ¹⁹. As Drummond and Bullock say, 'Reality fell far short of precept, but Scotland never forgot the ideal' ²⁰. Presbyterianism did not forsake education and men were raised up to satisfy the needs of a new age. A Glasgow merchant, and elder of Thomas Chalmers, David Stow did wonderful task at all levels of the educational ladder and the disruption of 1843 created many schools, but, such is another story.

¹⁹ Cf., Withrington D.J., *The Free Church Educational Scheme 1843-50*, Scottish Church History Society.

²⁰ Drummond A.L., Bullock J., op. Cit., p.84.