

REVIEW: EDUCATION AND THE SCOTTISH PEOPLE

D.J.Withrington

R.D.Anderson, **Education and the Scottish People, 1750-1918**, Oxford: Clarendon Press, £40, 1995, hb, ISBN 0 19 820515 5, pp.x+337.

Professor Robert Anderson of Edinburgh University has followed his fine account of Scottish secondary and higher education in the 19th century, **Education and Opportunity in Victorian Scotland** (Edinburgh University Press, 1983), with a study of popular education in roughly the same period, at the end of which, he argues, the 'national education system' was completed when the remaining denominational (mainly Roman Catholic) schools were incorporated within the local-authority-managed, public system in 1918. His book entirely supplants the old general histories of the subject: securely based in far more extensive research, it is also incisive in its analysis and remarkably comprehensive - I find no topic of consequence which is left untouched or does not get treatment in some depth.

Much of the text is given over to those issues which were of deep concern to contemporaries - the character and extent and quality of school provision, and the levels of literacy (reading and writing) to which it gave rise. The complex and often interrelated influences on education of politics and religion are shrewdly explored, as is the quickening pace and changing nature of state intervention. The core theme in this study, indeed, may be taken to be the increasingly emphatic and directive influence of government - especially such government agencies as the Committee of Council on Education and the Scotch (later Scottish) Education Department - on the structure and practices of Scottish schooling. These influences were cautious in 1839, more disruptively active from 1847 onwards, increasingly dictatorial after 1872 with the introduction of untraditional (but not always English-style) policies to the older parochial system. There is a lively discussion, continued from the

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author's earlier writings, of the interrelatedness in Scotland of a characteristically mixed elementary and secondary schooling with the national universities, and of the struggles to retain this in contests with the SED: here, indeed, it is possible to discern a distinct softening of the author's earlier critiques of the so-called 'myth' of the lad o' pairts. Then, particularly in his assessment of the school board era after 1872, there is a telling account of the growingly sharp 'segmentation' which occurred within Scottish public schooling: that is, the stratification of schools by social class, as central administrative policies were enforced, often in the teeth of parent and teacher opposition. Little wonder that Professor Anderson is drawn to conclude that 'schools drew their "Scottish" character as much from the community which they served as from distinctive educational characteristics'.

Until the 1830s, it is argued, the Church of Scotland, as the national religious Establishment, was the more-or-less agreed guardian of Scottish educational ideals - striving to provide and maintain universal access, for boys and girls, to a schooling which would at the least give them the opportunity to gain reading-literacy, and also aiding the able but poor boy in obtaining an extended schooling that could lead on to university studies. In the Lowlands, the author tells us, not surprisingly, by about 1800 the supply of schools (of all kinds) by and large met the ideal of universal provision. But when the parochial structure faltered under the ensuing demographic and economic pressures, not only in the Highlands and Islands but also in the rapidly urbanising districts of the Lowlands, at a time when the Church was being greatly weakened for other reasons, then its role as the acceptable overseer of the nation's education could no longer be sustained: in the 1830s there were embittered attacks on the principle of Establishment by presbyterian and other dissenting sects which had greatly increased in popular attachment; after 1832 Whig/Liberal governments refused to make those substantial additional endowments to the Church which it believed it required in order to meet the religious and educational needs of a rising and shifting population - and thus kept open the door to the proliferation of non-public, private schools; the final blow came, of course, in 1843 with the Disruption. The way was then open for the state and its agencies to supplant the remnant Church and secure an increasingly firm hold (mostly financial, but curricular and other) on a school provision that was thoroughly pluralistic, the input of many different groups and individuals. Having seen off attempts in the 1850s which might have reinvigorated and extended the old parochial system, in the course of the 1860s and 1870s the state was almost able to ignore the (still often conflicting) demands of the warring sects, and then introduced in 1872 an administrative structure which - locally elected school boards notwithstanding - permitted a very high degree of central control. By the

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early 1900s so secure was the state's position that it was able, with impunity under the dictatorial secretary of the SED, John Struthers, to shrug off widely-supported objections to plans which overturned traditionalists' aspirations for 'secondary education for all' in Scotland - and then to do so again in 1921-23.

These important themes, and many others, are cogently evaluated in a fine overview of a century and a half of developments in Scottish schooling, which contains much that is new and revisionary. The author's arguments are closely documented - with the data, where appropriate, helpfully set out in tables and maps, in both text and appendices. There are instructive sideways glances, intermittently, at parallel educational developments in England and in continental Europe, and here and there - if sometimes rather too strained in my view - arguments that 'the actual relationship of English and Scottish education was very close' in the period. Not the least of the book's qualities is that it is well written - a good and refreshing read; it deserves to reach far beyond the scholarly community to which it is primarily addressed.

Indeed, it is of a quality that may bring its own dangers; and it is important that both publishers and other scholars will resist looking at it as something close to the 'last word' on its subject. Professor Anderson is under no such illusions himself, it should be said, and he remarks in his preface on the constraints imposed on him in his constructing the account, and he hopes that it might serve as 'a foundation for the further research which is very much needed'. Even the central themes of this book can be, and should be, explored further; there are certainly aspects of the subject, subsidiary to the main thrust of the present volume, which, if investigated with energy and sophistication, could well emerge as fundamental to our better understanding of Scottish educational developments. And there are themes awaiting, not addressed by the author - he mentions as one 'how education was seen and used by those at the receiving end'; in that context I would offer one topic - namely, the impact of the 1872 Act on parent-customers (especially artisan and middle-class parents in the towns) as they found that what had been an often open-choice and multi-choice schooling, flexible and responsive to their needs (in curriculum, size of school, size of class, teaching hours, style of teaching), was reconstituted into a restrictive, increasingly uniform, take-it-because-you-can't-leave-it structure, which soon herded town children into the large enclosed classrooms and the regimented atmosphere of the school-barracks (for 800-1000 pupils) which resulted from SED policies and school-board penny-pinching.

Professor Anderson shares with his readers his reservations about previous authors' uncritical use of some of his main sources, and warns at one point

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that 'it is difficult for the historian to avoid sharing the language of progress or backwardness' that is used in the assessments of the state of schooling by the writers of and witnesses to those mainstays of his and others' researches into 19th century educational history, the great 'blue books' containing the voluminous reports of commissions and committees and the results of government surveys and enquiries. There is always room, of course, for the uncovering of new sources; or for the better use of known but generally ignored sources ('difficult' in one way or another); or for bringing a new look to the handling and interpretation of the usual texts. The use of all three of these possibilities would, I am sure, soon make untenable the still current judgment - which Professor Anderson has doubts about, tempers in his own statements, but in the end adheres to - about the gross inadequacy and wholesale impoverishment of the provision for Highland schooling in the later 18th and earlier 19th centuries. In fact, the most heavily used sources for the 1830s should give us particular pause - and not only in respect to the Highlands. Parish ministers, responding to government in 1833-4, at a peak in the disestablishment crisis and wishing to boost Church claims for the endowment of more parochial schools, were undoubtedly prone to under-reporting the numbers and quality of non-parochial, private, half-year, and unsecured schools - and thus reduce the confidence we might otherwise have in the survey results. Similarly, George Lewis's overused **Scotland the half-educated nation** of 1834 is a very partisan and misleading appraisal of the state of Scottish schooling, on behalf of the Established Church; but not more so than Principal George Baird's annual reports as convener of the General Assembly's education committee, for these can be shown wilfully to misrepresent even the data which parish ministers sent to him. Such barely hidden agendas are patently visible in other much-used sources: for instance, the regional reports by assistant commissioners to the Argyll Commission of 1865-68, in their decrying the calibre of private schooling, in sneering at the supposed 'confusion' (for whom?) of having multiple agencies of all kinds providing schools, and in promoting the concerted view that only a centrally-directed and national system could be acceptable (to whom?). Thus one astute commentator in 1867 suggested that the parliamentary bill proposed by the Argyll commission had been formulated first and then the report 'framed in conformity with the bill'!

Professor Anderson has certainly provided us with a new and firm groundwork on which to build, and has shown the way forward from it for studies which - picking their way critically through both old and new sources, often conflicting and not always as reliable as sometimes imagined - will further enhance our understanding of the Scottish educational past and its heritage to us. His book is doubly welcome: as a much-needed, insightful and

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nicely coherent account (here and there with its own idiosyncrasies) of a period of high complexity and significance for Scottish schooling, and also as an invaluable launching-pad for his own and others' further explorations of this vitally important factor in the making of modern Scottish society.

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