

REVIEW: SCOTTISH EDUCATION

Peter Scott

T.G.K. Bryce and W.M. Humes (eds), **Scottish Education**, □Edinburgh University Press, □ISBN 0748609806, pb, £24.99, pp.xvi+1040.□

This monumental book, the most comprehensive treatment ever of education in Scotland, is both timely and out-of-time. It is timely because after almost three centuries a parliament has been re-established in Edinburgh. As a result the Union between Scotland and England is being fundamentally reformed with unknowable consequences for both nations. The break-up of the United Kingdom, arguably the first modern European state (and also, perhaps, among the earliest and most successful world-states), can no longer be discounted. As a result it is right that this definitive study of Scottish education should appear at this pregnant moment in the history of the Scottish nation.

Education, after all, has been the most important - and certainly the most enduring - element in the formation of Scotland's national identity. The influence of Church and Law, the two other distinctive domains of Scotland's autonomous civil society after 1707, has faded. The Church of Scotland fatally fractured in the mid-nineteenth century then challenged by the rise of Catholic (and industrial?) Scotland has struggled to maintain its relevance in a secular age; the prestige of the Law has been undermined by its attachment to archaic (and elitist?) practices and its autonomy compromised by new legal doctrines originating outside Scotland and, indeed, the United Kingdom. In contrast education, thrice-hallowed by Tony Blair in the style of the witches in Macbeth, is more important than ever.

However, this book is out-of-time because it was conceived and its chapters written in the era of the unreformed Union. Although with hindsight Home Rule had been inevitable ever since Margaret Thatcher's fateful decision to pilot the poll tax in Scotland - and, therefore, the contributors to this book wrote in anticipation or with apprehension of that outcome - the tone of the

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book inevitably is of the old Unionist Scotland, of high-minded but collusive elites whose duty it had been to regulate Scottish civil society relatively untroubled by the unruly world of politics and ideology (which - conveniently? - had relocated to Westminster). Many of the contributors to this book, also inevitably, are drawn from this 'official' Scotland which may - or may not - be about to be fundamentally challenged by the new political order.

At the heart of this book, therefore, is ambivalence on a fundamental issue - how 'national' is Scottish education? Contrast these two statements. First, Robert Anderson on the history of Scottish education up to 1980: 'Scottish education has been characterised by a peculiar awareness of its own history. Since 1707 its distinctiveness has been a mark of national identity to be defended against assimilation with England, and its supposed superiority has been a point of national pride'. Despite sceptical hints - 'peculiar awareness', 'supposed superiority' and so on - Anderson appears here to accept a strong link between educational difference and the constitution of Scottish identity.

Next, David McCrone writing two chapters later on Culture, Nationalism and Scottish Education: Homogeneity and Diversity: 'At the core of this chapter is a puzzle. Scottish education is central to Scottish national identity. The movement for statehood in most western countries was about mobilising a strong sense of national identity. Why, then, has it taken until the closing years of the twentieth century for a Scottish parliament to be re-established?' McCrone's unspoken indictment seems to be that the leadership class of Scottish education, content with the limited autonomy enjoyed under the Union, has shown little enthusiasm for Home Rule (let alone independence).

Of course, one answer (or defence?) is that, although there are significant differences between education in Scotland and England (nearly all of which, incidentally, have developed since 1707 and therefore can plausibly be regarded as 'Unionist' phenomena), there are equally - or more - significant similarities. This is hardly surprising. Education reflects, as well as interprets, socio-economic circumstances. These circumstances have been produced largely by 'British' rather than specifically Scottish or English forces - modernity, industrialisation, urbanisation, secularism. The United Kingdom economy - and so labour market - is highly integrated. Cultural particularities have been eroded by the mass media. Perhaps, after all, education is the wrong place in which to locate a distinctive national identity, however uncongenial this may be in Scotland where education as a protected arena under the Treaty of Union is regarded as a key determinant of 'difference'. It

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may be unfair to blame the educational policy community, or leadership class, for failing to develop a sufficiently 'national' viewpoint.

Five important differences between Scottish and English education are identified by the various contributors to the book. These differences, however, can be explained in pragmatic, even coincident, terms as well as in national-historical terms. Indeed most of the contributors, maybe unconsciously, lean to the former rather than latter interpretations. The first difference is that this leadership class is more cohesive and better integrated (and less politicised?) than its English counterpart - but whether this is simply because it is smaller and more concentrated (the pragmatic interpretation) or because education is more central to Scotland's national culture (the national-historical interpretation) is unclear.

Second, Scottish education appears to be less open to innovation and experimentation - although again there is a choice of explanations; this may be because a smaller and more tightly organised system has fewer unpoliced spaces in which eccentricity can thrive (pragmatism) or because education is too important in Scotland to be messed with (nationalism). Third, Scottish education has certainly been less resistant to comprehensive schools and solutions. But this may be because, in its central-belt core, Scotland is a more industrialised and urbanised society than England with its suburbs and shires, rather than because of some faint stirring of a distinctively national consciousness rooted in kail-9ard memories of burgh schools or lads o'pairts. It is also worth remembering that the Edinburgh bourgeoisie has been as successful as its counterparts in English cities at defending its inter-generational life-chances behind a protective cordon of privileged schools.

Fourth, education in Scotland is apparently more 'academic' than in England. One result of this reluctance to accept a subordinated, and consequently differentiated, 'secondary modern' tradition (to adopt English terminology) is that Scotland, perhaps fortuitously, has been better able to develop a more integrated model of academic and vocational education (and of education and training) after the age of 16. On the other hand the same reluctance may have insulated the Scottish universities from the invigorating challenge posed to English universities by the former polytechnics. George Davie's 'Democratic Intellect' (to which, revealingly, there are only four, far from flattering, references in this whole book), arguably celebrated a doric populism ill suited to the needs of working-class education.

Fifth, Scottish education appears to be more egalitarian in its outcomes. It is claimed to transcend rather than entrench class differences, although this

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claim may reflect different cultural constructions of social mobility north and south of the Tweed. It has also been challenged. For example, differences in post-school progression between Scotland and England have narrowed as both systems have moved closer to mass participation. In the case of higher education it is Scottish further education colleges' much larger stake in advanced courses that has produced the participation gap between Scotland and England, not the allegedly populist traditions of Scottish universities which are no better, or worse, than civic universities in the north of England.

At a more detailed level distinctive educational policy and practice in Scotland can also be explained either in minimalist, and pragmatic, or in maximalist, and 'national', terms. The reluctance of HM Inspectors in Scotland to follow Chris Woodhead's Ofsted way may reflect the cohesiveness (and apolitical character?) of the leadership class as well as their distaste for divisive policies. The University of the Highlands and Islands may be as much a response to geographical imperatives as a radical experiment in FE-delivered higher education. And it would be misleading to conclude that because the new Scottish Executive had been forced to establish the Cubie inquiry into student fees attachment to 'free' higher education was fiercer north of the Border; if Westminster MPs were elected according to proportional representation, a similar outcome could have been expected.

If these reflections suggest that the centre-of-gravity of the contributions to Scottish Education is administrative rather than ideological, pragmatic rather than 'national', this impression is not entirely misleading. Indeed 'Education in Scotland' might have been a more accurate title than **Scottish Education**, which may imply an urgent search for Scottishness that is absent in many of the chapters. This is not intended in any way to be a critical comment. The book is more than a thousand pages long and has 112 separate chapters grouped under 14 main headings - policy, administration, historical context, pre-school, primary, secondary, curriculum and so on. As a result it has many of the qualities (and a few of the vices) of an encyclopaedia. Encyclopaedia-writing encourages description and cautious analysis rather than radical interpretation, argumentation and, least of all, polemic. Even when contributors adopt a more critical perspective, they do not always engage the (key?) issues of Scottishness, cultural difference and national identity.

Contributors clearly had to operate within strict word and other limits. As a result, even when adopting a more critical stance, they have not always been able to be as discursive as they might have liked. In some cases the effect is apparent inhibition. Those familiar with the lively argument that

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characterises the writing of Lindsay Paterson may speculate how much more sparky his overview of policy and provision might have been if he had been let off the leash. In other cases the effect is cryptic. Stewart Sutherland offers some intriguing ideas about how the populism of the Scottish universities could be (re?) invented. But, presumably because of the constraints under which he was operating these ideas are not properly developed.

In **Scottish Education** the priority is to be authoritative - occasionally at the cost of intellectual excitement. In most places and at most times that would be entirely justifiable. This is a book designed to last, the standard text on all and every aspect of education in modern Scotland. But there is, unfortunately for the editors and authors, an alignment between being authoritative and the values, political and intellectual, of the Scottish Establishment, the leadership class which managed Scotland's civil society within the framework of the Union; and between intellectual excitement and those insurgent forces which are now using the revival of Scotland's political identity to challenge not only (or even particularly) England and the Union but the class structure of Unionist Scotland.

So it is not a coincidence that the retrospective is handled so much more surely than the prospective. The real intentions behind the 'national' myths of Unionist Scotland (prominent among which were myths of educational difference - the lad o'pairts, the Democratic Intellect and the rest) were to assert - and also accommodate? - Scottish identity within a United Kingdom, a modern society in its time and an imperial state. That - great - game is over. A new game has begun - greater or meaner? Who can say? Not the contributors to **Scottish Education** - collectively, however lively their individual efforts. The final chapter on the future of Scottish education, by the two editors, is measured and tentative, in the best traditions of scholarship. But, for reasons for which they cannot possibly be blamed, it leaves the reader dissatisfied - neither threnody for a famous Union nor fanfare for a new nation.

November 1999