

REVIEW: SCOTTISH LIFE AND SOCIETY: EDUCATION

Brian Simon

Heather Holmes (ed.) **Institutions of Scotland: Education**, (Scottish Life and Society. A Compendium of Scottish Ethnology. Volume 11), Phantassie: Tuckwell Press, 2000, 300 pp, Hardback, £25 , ISBN 1 86232 186 8.

This striking symposium – a project of the European Ethnological Research Centre – is one volume of a major series devoted to discussion of 'what led up to the making of Scottish Society as it is today'. Three of the total of thirteen volumes are concerned with domains which, after the Treaty of Union (1707), were considered 'safe areas' for the expression of nationalist objectives, that is the law, religion, education. Consequently, as is well known, Scottish educational development has differed markedly from the English pattern. The point that here emerges most strikingly is the successful establishment of comprehensive schooling which the Scots seem to have adopted almost unanimously since the reforms of the 1960s. Scotland, with a fully comprehensive system, seems generally comfortable with and proud of it.

Evidently a key moment was the Scottish Education Department's 1965 Circular 600. At the time, of 668 secondary schools, 376 were selective and in 158 there was some selection. All were required to 'consider their position'. Local authorities were entitled to advance schemes but, according to the author of the article 'Independent Educational Institutions' - Dr Ian Morris, formerly HM Chief Inspector of Schools and director of research at the Scottish Education Department – the government attitude was 'hardline and few of these were ever considered'. The approach to grant aided schools was 'equally uncompromising'. Authorities with such schools in their area were advised that they would 'no doubt wish to consult' the governing bodies of

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these 'as to the part they can play in a comprehensive system'. The matter is approached in a somewhat different spirit in a thoughtful contribution on 'Secondary Education', as an institution of society formed historically, by Dr Hamish Paterson of Glasgow University's Education Department. In this case the post-1965 reorganisation 'whereby all children from a local neighbourhood attend the same school' ranks as 'undoubtedly ... the most crucial development in the twentieth century'. While Scotland still has 'some selective private schools, the comprehensive school is now accepted by the bulk of the population as the paradigm of Scottish secondary education'. Such is the degree of consensus, indeed, 'that no Scottish political party dares to dismantle it'.

With one recent historical stage covered in this survey my family has had some direct experience, going back over half a century. It was my mother who first took an interest in Scottish development in the late 1940s, after some enquiry into American high schools conducted during an official wartime visit. A longstanding member of Manchester Education Committee, chairman in the 1930s, she was also a member of the Consultative Committee of the Board of Education, replacing R. H. Tawney on his retirement. As a member of that committee, under the chairmanship of Sir Hill Spens, she was signatory to a report whose opening chapter firmly set aside the comprehensive school at the secondary level, advising the development of technical secondary schools alongside grammar schools. This ruling was under informal instruction, it has been supposed, given the mass approval for a comprehensive form of development in the evidence submitted to the Spens Committee (summarised in my **The Politics of Educational Reform** (1974)).

The Spens recommendation was in due course to carry weight in discussion accompanying the drafting and passage of the 1944 Act - discussions in which, despite acclamation for the principle of opening up secondary education for all, the official view favoured a tripartite pattern embodying selection at age 11. But only a few years after the passage of the act, largely as a result of studying Scottish experience, Steve Simon, a signatory of the Spens Report, renewed the call for a single secondary school. A subsequent small book, published under the title **Three Schools or One. Secondary Education in England, Scotland and the U.S.A.** (1952) brought aspects of this experience into English discussion for the first time, not least the 'omnibus schools' alongside the new Hilderel school.

A visit of enquiry had been undertaken in 1947-8, accompanied by my wife (in the early 1940s, under wartime conditions, assistant to Harold Dent,

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editor of the **Times Education Supplement**). The resulting book, strongly favouring the single secondary school, by a writer closely acquainted with administrative aspects, carried considerable weight in England where all too little had been known of advances in Scotland.

In the circumstances I, for my own part an admirer of Scottish enterprise, felt assured of support when invited, in the mid 1960s, to present the case for non-selective secondary education at a vast teach-in organised by Aberdeen City Council. What I met with, surprisingly enough, was sharp criticism for attempting to foist subversive English ideas on the Scots; this from a leading educational historian (James Scotland)! The next morning, seeking reports of the occasion in the Scottish press in Aberdeen station, it was disappointing to find little but conservative comment on what had been a well attended and successful occasion - even if opinions in the audience were apparently mixed.

Yet only three years on Aberdeen city council decided to go fully comprehensive, the crucial decision. Evidently these years marked a critical turning point in Scotland.

John Lloyd, in 'Scottish Education, Social Change and Educational Reform in the Second World War', cites an observation by H. C. Dent. Here was one who 'gave voice to a widespread belief when he warned that the full implementation of the 1944 Act might possibly make all the difference between a happy and glorious future for our country and an unhappy and inglorious one'. There is nothing glorious about England's present retreat, on entry to the twenty-first century, from the establishment of comprehensive schooling. This under the rule of a dictatorial prime minister – as it happens a product of a Scottish independent school. Ruling aside recognition of the values of the established Scottish paradigm, intent on consolidating differentiation if not introducing privatisation, Blair reverts to a sadly out of date position comparable with that of the 1930s Spens report.

A relevant article in the symposium relates to such foundations as Fettes College; that of J. A. Mangan 'Missionaries to the Middle Classes', picked out by Heather Holmes in an introductory article to the symposium she has edited. Setting aside the Clarendon Commission as the resuscitating force revivifying 'the soi-disant public-school system', Mangan attributes renewed vitality squarely to 'athleticism, the games cult or the games ethic'. The introduction of this to transform an expanding secondary system in conditions of increasing national prosperity was 'a brilliant system of social engineering', quite insufficiently recognised as such. Order was brought out of disorder, 'patterns of institutional cohesion and conformity' imposed an

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attractive training for imperial careers introduced – even if the English dominated diplomacy, Scots provided science and professionalism. A leading Scottish advocate of this programme, Hely Hutchinson Almond, headmaster of Loretto at Musselburgh from 1862, promoted, with a belief in muscular and moral superiority, a passionate support of imperialism.

Links with Oxbridge, not least Balliol College, notably assisted in the creation of 'a "British" identity' through schooling by the Scottish middle class. John Guthrie Kerr of Balliol ensured that the middle class schools of Glasgow, in particular, neither Scottish nor English, 'were British institutions training Scots for the British Empire. As such they furnish fascinating illustrations of ethnic adaptation in the interests of survival, security and prosperity', with sport as central to the adaptation.

Here – in a sector of the symposium discussing a wide variety of 'aspects of Scottish education' – is an example of the way an ethnological approach opens up the social dimension. Other articles discuss such matters as women in education, literacy, the Gaelic language, and informal education, in addition to such central concerns as teachers, taught, discipline, curricula. The symposium departs from a discussion of 'Traditions of Scottish Education' by Lindsay Paterson with a second section on administration and provision opened by Donald Withrington on church and state in education up to 1872.

The third sections then deals with 'type and nature of institutions' from the elementary and special to university level; this more usual central concern being much broadened by the final treatment of the very various 'aspects' of education commonly either ignored or taken for granted.

Nonetheless, the English reader is likely to return to the article on the 'type and nature' of secondary schooling as it has latterly developed in Scotland. For H. M. Paterson's article provides a careful evaluation of a twentieth century development from a meritocratic vision, grounded on equal right of access, to a drive 'by large sections of Scottish society' towards 'equality of treatment'; a 'campaign for equal access' which culminated in arrangements 'whereby all children from a local neighbourhood area attended the same school', a state-funded secondary comprehensive school. Very few now leave at the statutory age of 16 'without certification of some sort', besides the increasing trend to stay on beyond that age and achieve more at the Higher examination level. And of particular interest here is the improvement registered for girls. In this connection the 'mixed response' of Scots to the Conservative government's 'assisted places' scheme is of interest. While

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many Scottish parents welcomed the initiative 'enthusiasm was decidedly more fitful' than in England. This, it is suggested, 'may well indicate a fundamental shift in the class structures and value orientations of the country'.

A contributory factor must surely be success in encouraging higher studies. Eighteen might well become the de facto leaving age of this millennium. If so, then the relatively open Scottish tradition of secondary education, albeit modified to take account of modernity, will prove to have 'survived over one hundred years of attempts to make it the exclusive privilege of a meritocratic elite' – even if the old debate continues to feature at the higher or further level.

It is long past time for England to embark on an equally searching examination of past tradition and present reality shaping the future, bringing to bear a conjunction of economic and social, intellectual and cultural history, an approach essential to clarifying the complexities of educational development.

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