Scottish Affairs, no. 50, winter 2005

REVIEW: HISTORY OF UNIVERSITIES

Lindsay Paterson

Michael Moss, J. Forbes Munro and Richard H. Trainor, **University City and State: The University of Glasgow since 1870**, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, 382 + xvii pp, hb, £41, ISBN 0 7486 1323 4.

Robert. D. Anderson, Michael Lynch and Nicholas Phillipson, **The University of Edinburgh: An Illustrated History**, Edinburgh University Press, 2003, 216 + viii pp, pb, £14.99, ISBN 0 7486 1646 2.

Gordon Kirk, **Moray House and the Road to Merger**, Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2002, 88 + viii pp, pb, £14.95, ISBN 1 9037 6533 1.

Histories of individual educational institutions are unfashionable among social scientists, regarded as an antiquarian marketing ploy for the coffee tables of alumni. Yet institutions are the neglected middle ground between the grand themes of policy or social change on the one hand and the detailed experience of students on the other. Universities and schools shape individuals; their collective life confers identity, especially when experienced at an impressionable early age; and they are themselves as important to politics as any other institutions of civil society. So a history of significant institutions can tell us much about the wider national history as well as about the kinds of citizens which educational practices have sought to shape, and about the changing views of the role of education which the nation has held.

Fortunately, the historians have never ceased to write institutional histories, and the last few years in Scotland have continued to yield new work in this vein, even if sometimes the commercial opportunity has indeed depended on the purchasing power of nostalgic former students. And if nothing else were to commend them, two of the books reviewed here would undoubtedly be

---

Lindsay Paterson is professor of educational policy at Edinburgh University, and editor of ***Scottish Affairs****.*

attractive to that market: the beautifully reproduced illustrations they offer from the archives of Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities remind us how valuable the mere antiquity of old institutions can be.

The stories told in both the Edinburgh and the Glasgow books might be rather familiar to anyone who has followed the debate about Scottish culture, and it would be tempting to read these as one of steady deracination ultimately provoking what George Davie famously called the crisis of the democratic intellect. The book by Moss et al starts with the controversies around the move of Glasgow University to Gilmorehill in 1870 from the medieval site on the High Street. It would be easy to read the symbolism as palpable: from a site down amidst the smoke and commerce of the east end, to a lofty eminence in the heart of one of the most bourgeois of the city's districts. It may have been a locally inspired and financed flitting, but – according to this kind of interpretation – it marked the beginning of the slow end of truly local attachment. In the manner beloved of those who would romanticise this kind of past, a subtle elision of decades of subsequent change can portray the move as preparing the way for the growing tension between university and Scottish state institutions in the first four decades of the twentieth century, not only over the Scottish Education Department's insistence on controlling the education of school teachers (the main destination of graduates from the dominant Arts Faculty), but also over the perceived parochialism of Scottish Office civil servants and Scottish Labour politicians. Funding by the University Grants Committee based in London then grew from under one third of all income in 1919 to over three quarters by the 1960s. According to this story, the rise of specialist research, the decline of the Ordinary degree, and the gradual abandonment of any aspiration to a core curriculum around philosophy were all part of a deep cultural betrayal. Moss and his colleagues describe all these features in careful detail, and although writing with admirable detachment, would not wholly dissent from some of these judgements:

> It was the University's dilemma between the wars that it served the needs of a Scottish economy and society but received its state funding from a body which had no responsibility for or interest in that economy and society. In that mismatch lay the roots of most of its troubles. (p. 180)

If that story can be told about Glasgow, it seems to be all the more damningly true of Edinburgh, the university that has most often been the butt of a certain kind of nationalist complaint. The work by Anderson et al covers a much longer time span than the Glasgow volume, reaching right back to the university's founding by the city in 1583. Michael Lynch's essay on the first century or so is a useful clarification of the intricate interplay between intrusive religious politics and the Calvinist intellectualism that ultimately led to the university's flourishing. If Nicholas Phillipson's essay on the eighteenth century then seems very familiar, that is not only because the author has written so much and so well on this topic over the last thirty years, but also because the entire Enlightenment in Scotland truly was based in the universities, and in Edinburgh above all. Robert Anderson's essay covers the period since the early nineteenth century, on which he himself is the leading historian of Scottish education generally. In significant respects, especially in contrast to its civic foundations, but also compared to the locally rooted character of Scottish thought in the eighteenth century, the period from the late-nineteenth century is – as in Glasgow – one of steady drift away from local embedding. Anderson is particularly illuminating on the turning-in on itself which was represented by the growth of what he calls 'corporate life' – the clubs and societies and bizarre social mores that came to define what it meant to be a university student in the first part of the twentieth century, and which erected a firm barrier of social status between students and wider community. Because of its size and location in the national capital, Edinburgh's enthusiastic move into a realm of British and then international academic culture between the 1920s and the 1980s occasioned particularly voluble angst about the decline of Scotland's traditions of higher learning. Anderson concludes:

> Ever since its foundation, the university has balanced its obligations to the city, the nation, the Empire, the international academic community. But when fewer than half of its students come from Scotland, and the once close links with local schools have all but dissolved, the community base is perhaps the part of the balance most in need of attention. (p. 207)

But stories of decline are too familiar in Scottish debate, and the alternative narrative – well represented in these always scholarly books – is at least as cogent. The main modernisation of Scottish universities that happened in the first half of the twentieth century was that they became the source of the new professional classes that governed the welfare state: they taught the teachers, the doctors, the lawyers, the medics, the social workers, the planners, and the civil servants and politicians themselves. Insofar as Scotland became a 'professional society' (the phrase coined for this process by Harold Perkin's book of that name), it was one shaped by its universities.

What was new was the means of recruitment – through the new system of secondary schools, and the new Leaving Certificate, rather than the old parish schools. This is where Davie's thesis – and, from it, the premise of three decades of nationalist and socialist views about Scottish education – is most mistaken. The secondary schools democratised access to the universities in measurable ways: Glasgow and Aberdeen Universities were more working class in the 1920s and 1930s than they had ever been in the nineteenth century; women could gain access as never before; and if access temporarily narrowed somewhat in the recession of the 1930s, the links between universities and local secondary schools that had been laid in the inter-war period formed the basis for post-war expansion. Much of this was facilitated by grants from the Carnegie Trust, a uniquely Scottish institution, and also by the bursaries which the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act empowered the education authorities to award.

The curricular changes that have generated such controversy in retrospect were inevitable consequences of this reorganisation. The typical university entrant of the 1920s and after was acquiring from courses for the Leaving Certificate at least as thorough a grounding in general culture as her or his forebears would have received in the old arts curriculum of the universities. By international standards, Scottish education as a whole managed this transition rather well: it widened access, retained a broad curricular base, but also – by transferring that to the schools – enabled university courses to become more specialised.

As is clear from both these university volumes, if there was a crisis of local commitment and of cultural purpose it dates from the 1970s, not earlier. If Scottish universities have been ignoring their local contexts, it has been for no more than about one generation, not three or four. Moreover, as Kirk's book on the apparently recondite subject of the merger between Edinburgh University and the former Moray House College of Education makes clear, the controversies to which that cultural distancing gave rise were the source of much of the current thinking about the structure of mass higher education in Scotland. That merger, as in the others that have taken place in the past decade, re-established local professional links in a university that seemed in the 1980s to be ignoring their value, an explicit intention in the agreement between the two institutions when it was announced by their principals, Gordon Kirk himself and Stewart Sutherland.

These histories remind us of the importance of institutions. What a country means by education is always embodied primarily in institutional legacies and practices, not first of all in legislation or policies. Despite the rhetoric of loss that surrounds a great deal of debate about Scottish education, the universities which the country has today contain tensions within themselves, multiple and sometimes contradictory traditions that vie with each other for predominance in each generation. Particular traditions may appear to have been lost because they have been forgotten by politicians and academic managers (or never known in the first place by most journalists). But they usually remain alive in educational practice, or are revitalised when institutions join with others. As Scotland engages in a new debate about how to organise its higher education, it should perhaps learn from histories such as these that all claims to cultural homogeneity are wrong: multiple traditions do not neatly separate institutions into distinct groups, but in fact flourish within each of them.