THE HISTORY OF SCOTTISH EDUCATION

Volume I – From the Beginnings to 1872
Volume II – From 1872 to the Present Day

James Scotland
(University of London Press Ltd., 1969/70)

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The first attempt at writing a history of Scottish education seems to have been the short work of 24 pages by David Middleton, one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in the third quarter of last century. It was entitled *A Glance at the History of Scottish Education* and was published at Edinburgh in 1860. Since then at least another fourteen works on the same subject have appeared, the latest of them being the two-volume *History of Scottish Education* by the Principal of Aberdeen College of Education. Some of its predecessors were, like Middleton's work, no more than pamphlets; others, however, were substantial works, though Dr John Kerr's *Scottish Education* was the only one of them to achieve a second edition, and that was more than half a century ago. None of these earlier works, however, covers so wide a field as do Mr Scotland's two volumes, and none of them, except perhaps James Grant's *Burgh Schools of Scotland*, deals with its subject in such detail. Grant indeed is fuller on his chosen subject than is Mr Scotland on any one of the aspects of Scottish education with which he deals, but Grant wrote on a limited topic on a very large scale and that is why his book has not yet been superseded in its particular field.

Mr Scotland's first volume is much longer than his second one. This is not wholly because it covers a much longer period, since by the middle of it he has reached the year 1803, so that its remaining 190 pages are devoted to the story of the next sixty-nine years. The main reason is that before the Act of 1872 created a unified and uniform system of education directed and largely controlled from the centre there were many separate interests all of which call for separate study. At the same time it may seem strange that the history of the first thousand years of Scottish education can be told in 180 pages, as is done here. The reason is that hardly any of the materials on which a detailed study could be based now exist. To add 'if they ever existed' is to ignore such documents as *Reports on the State of Certain Parishes in Scotland* drawn up in 1627, or the *Register containing the State of every Burgh within the Kingdome of Scotland* which belongs to the year 1692. Both of these contain information about educational matters preserved nowhere else, though Mr Scotland does not seem to have consulted them. Their existence leads one to wonder how many others have perished and what might have been learned from them. If the original records of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for the years before 1638 disappeared so long ago that their contents are now known only from transcripts made in the early seventeenth century, then it is clear that less important documents could easily vanish without trace.

The amplitude of the text and the care taken to document the narrative show Mr Scotland's researches to have been both wider and deeper than those of any of his predecessors. He has not been content to confine himself to the obvious sources such as the Minutes and Circulars of the *Committee of*

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Council on Education or the mass of publications produced by its successors, or such standard works as the *Statistical Accounts of Scotland*, but has read widely in local histories and works of a similar nature so that he is able to substantiate general statements by particular examples. One source, however, of which he might perhaps have made more use, especially when it came to assessing the movement of opinion, is the pamphlet and periodical literature which the nineteenth century in particular produced in large quantity. The material collected from all his sources has been set in order by Mr Scotland and constructed into a narrative which moves easily and steadily through the years. While 'history' implies a progression in time – and this Mr Scotland has followed – the time-scheme has here been so modified as to allow as well a topical arrangement of the subject-matter. The result is the most comprehensive and also the most easily used history of Scottish education which has yet appeared.

In one or two respects, however, it disappoints. A comprehensive history such as this might be expected to deal with the aims of Scottish education, the policy or policies by which these aims were to be attained, and the way in which that policy was implemented, under the last of which headings would come the provision of schools and other educational establishments, the quantity and quality of the education provided, and the advantage taken of the opportunities offered by the educational system created. Mr Scotland is not equally informative on all these matters. He has little to say, for example, on the aims of Scottish education over the centuries and what he has to say is scattered throughout his book and must be assembled by the reader himself. The view taken of the aims and the purpose of education has not always been the same but has changed as society has altered and developed. But this one would hardly understand from this work. One example will suffice. When Lord Melgund brought in his Education Bill in 1850 one of its critics declared that 'education was the handmaiden of religion', and how this statement is to be understood can be learned from a passage in the pamphlet, *National Education in Scotland*, which the Rev. W. M. Hetherington published in the same year. There it is plainly stated that 'the function of education is to restrict and restrain man's evil nature, to direct him towards salvation by teaching him to read the Bible and to accept its teaching'. That practice largely conformed to theory is suggested by the statement in the *Old Statistical Account* that 'in the greater part of the schools in Glasgow, nothing is taught but reading English, the Catechism, and perhaps a little writing'.[1] John Knox and his co-authors of the *First Book of Discipline* could probably have accepted this programme without question or qualification, but it is doubtful if many, if any, would today regard it as a full and valid statement of the purpose of education. Moreover, the quantity and the content of education will usually depend very largely on the stage of cultural development reached by the community. There is little point in teaching people to read if there is nothing for them to read; or in teaching them to write if they have nobody to address in writing and nothing to write about. This suggests another reason why there is so little to be said about Scottish education before the sixteenth century: up till then the country had been largely in the pre-literate stage. It is not known, for example, how the population was divided between English and Gaelic speakers, and when Scottish education in the Middle Ages is under discussion it is usually the education of the former group that is intended. What language, for example, did Robert the Bruce habitually use? Was it English, or Gaelic, or Anglo-Norman? Barbour's evidence suggests the third of these, for he reports that when Bruce was in hiding on Loch Lomondside

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in 1306 he read to his companions from the romance of Ferumbras. That must have been in the original French, for no English version was made till the fifteenth century.

Mr Scotland admits that there was little school education in Scotland before the Reformation. In that case one feature of written Scots in the medieval period calls for an explanation that so far has never been given. This is the remarkable uniformity of the orthography employed in the works written in the vernacular. There are none of those dialectal peculiarities of spelling and grammar that enable the student of Middle English literature to assign the place of composition of any particular work to within fairly narrow geographical limits. This cannot be done for Middle Scots. It would be interesting to know how the fairly standard orthography of Middle Scots came into existence and how it was maintained over a wide area.

If it has at times been believed that only a little education was necessary for the vast majority of the population, this is not the least generous attitude that has been held. The view that the lower classes in the community should receive any education at all was indeed strongly opposed by many till at least the middle of last century. As clear a statement of this point of view as any is to be found in the objections offered by the President of the Royal Society to Whitbread's Bill of 1807, the purpose of which was to provide elementary schools throughout England. He said, 'However specious in theory the project might be of giving education to the labouring classes of the poor, it would in effect be found to be prejudicial to their morals and happiness; it would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture, and other laborious employment to which their rank in society had destined them; instead of teaching them subordination, it would render them factious and refractory, as was evident in the manufacturing counties; it would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books, and publications against Christianity; it would render them insolent to their superiors'.[2] Such views were not unknown in Scotland, though perhaps never so plainly stated. Even Dr Guthrie of Ragged School fame is said to have regarded an education in school as only a second-best to parental instruction and upbringing. In short, Mr Scotland might be criticised for concerning himself too exclusively with what went on in the schools and not enough with purpose and policy, in other words, for treating education as if it existed in a kind of vacuum having no connection with the world and the society in which its products would have to live and act.

Sometimes, however, Mr Scotland's analysis of the way in which policy was implemented seems hardly to go deep enough. He admits that the early Scottish Acts of Parliament, aimed at providing a school for everybody in every parish, were as often as not more honoured in the breach than in the observance. One reason for this was the failure to provide machinery for their enforcement. But even when this defect was remedied by the Act of 1696 improvement was slow to come. It is usual to blame this failure to provide the schools that the law demanded on the meanness and miserliness of the heritors, whose statutory duty it was to provide them. But the explanation may not be as simple as that. Scotland, after all, till the Industrial Revolution brought it economic prosperity, had advanced little beyond the stage of subsistence agriculture and was therefore neither rich nor provided with liquid cash resources. Not all the heritors were great and wealthy noblemen or even very well-to-do gentry and much of their income came to them in kind, 'kain' hens and so forth. If it is true that the parish school was attended by the sons of every class in the community one would have expected the heritors to

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provide adequately for the education of their own sons. That they failed to do so – for not all of them could afford to send their sons to English public schools or even to board them with the burgh schoolmaster in some Scottish town – argues either that the tradition is less valid than is generally believed, or that heritors simply had not the money to spend on a school and a schoolmaster's salary. Indirect evidence for this view comes from an unexpected source. Mr Scotland draws attention to the campaign conducted by the parochial schoolmasters of Scotland in the late 1740s for better salaries[3] but which came to nothing because, as he points out, the ministers through the General Assembly refused their support to it. They did so because they were at that time themselves pressing for an increase in their stipends and the extra money for this would have had to come out of the heritors' pockets. But the heritors were also responsible for finding the schoolmaster's salary and in taking the action they did the ministers showed clearly that they did not think there was enough money available to satisfy both claims; being human they put themselves first. Moreover, it was on the parish minister and his kirk session that the duty lay of taking the first steps towards having the Act of 1696 implemented. But by the Patronage Act of 1712 the appointment of the minister lay with the heritors and, human nature being what it is, not every one would be strong-minded enough to take legal action against his patrons in order to have a school legally established, especially when these same heritors might also, some of them, be members of his kirk session.

Full as Mr Scotland's narrative is, it is not without its omissions. Thus, there might have been some reference to the university extension movement of the early part of last century when, independently of each other, there was a proposal to transfer the University of St Andrews to Perth and the suggestions were canvassed that new universities might be set up at Dumfries and Inverness. Again, the temper of the time comes out in the difficulties experienced by the Free Church after the Disruption of 1843 in obtaining sites for schools and churches and the intervention of Parliament was needed to ease the situation. But the narrative here of the establishment of the Free Church schools would suggest that the only difficulty was in finding the money to pay the schoolmasters an adequate emolument. A more serious omission is the passing over in almost complete silence of the controversy which raged for the twenty years before 1872 on the question of national education in Scotland. No Scottish debate on any aspect of education has ever lasted as long as this did, produced so much pamphlet and periodical literature, or inflamed tempers so much, and led in the end to a compromise when it was obvious that neither of the extreme wings in the argument was prepared to concede any of their opponent's case. It would have been useful to have had a closer comparison of Young's Act of 1872 with the Bills which Moncrieff laboured so hard to persuade Parliament to pass in the 1850s and the 1860s. It has also been argued that the work of the Committee of Council on Education, concerned as it chiefly was with the larger, more numerous, and more serious educational problems in England, did much harm to the Scottish tradition in education. It would have been interesting to have Mr Scotland's views on this opinion. Little information is given about the Scottish contribution to the literature of education, but until comparatively recently this seems to have been remarkably small. Alexander Hume, a master first in the High School of Edinburgh and then in the Grammar School of Dunbar, published in 1617 his *Of the Orthographie and Congruitie of Britan Tongue* but no other educational writing seems to have appeared in Scotland till James Barclay's *Treatise on Education* was published in Edinburgh in 1743. That it

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was found useful is suggested by the fact that an edition was published in London in 1749. Then there is silence till George Chapman's *Thoughts on Education* are published in Edinburgh in 1773. This work was even more successful than Barclay's, for it went into five editions in the next twenty-three years, each edition after the first being published in London and larger than its predecessor. But by that time England had a whole library of educational works, the foundation of which had been laid in Anglo-Saxon times. Both the Scottish contribution to educational thinking and the sources of that contribution are topics that urgently call for investigation.

Issue may also be taken with Mr Scotland on some of his general statements, usually ones that have little to do with education. Thus, he says that 'in the fifties John Knox was preaching his thunderous sermons against the old faith which resulted on more than one occasion in the tearing down of its abbeys and churches' (I, 43). But in that decade Knox was in Scotland only for nine months from the late autumn of 1555 to July 1556 and for the last nine months of 1559. While he did preach with his usual vehemence in the first of these periods no outbreaks of mob violence followed any of his sermons then. The first outbreak against the Roman Catholic church came after his sermon in Perth on 11 May 1559, when the houses of the Blackfriars and of the Greyfriars in that town were looted and despoiled along with the Charterhouse. He also writes (I, 43) as if the appropriation of church lands by the Scottish nobles began at this time. But by the system of *in commendam* many of these had already passed into their control and the change of ownership was largely nominal. This is one reason why there was in Scotland no Dissolution of the Monasteries such as there was in England.

None of these observations is intended to detract from the merit of Mr Scotland's work, which must become, and for long remain, the standard work on its subject. Indeed, he has made it very difficult for anyone else to follow him along the lines that mark the conventional approach to the history of Scottish education. Both the philosophical and the sociological approaches to the subject will provide plenty of scope for his successors.

NOTES

[1] Vol. 5, p. 530.

[2] Quoted in Cipolla, C. M. (1969). *Literacy and Development in the West*. Penguin Books, p. 65.

[3] The William Smith who was sent to London in 1749 to present the petition of the parochial schoolmasters to Parliament was at that time schoolmaster at Abernethy and still only twenty years of age. In 1751 he emigrated to America where in the course of a somewhat turbulent career he became Principal of the newly chartered College of Philadelphia.

MEMOIRS OF A MODERN SCOTLAND

Edited by Karl Miller
(Faber & Faber, 1970)

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What sort of man was Hector MacIver (1910-1966), the schoolteacher from Lewis who is honoured by the sixteen essays in this book? It is notoriously difficult to explain the qualities of a good teacher to those who did not know

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