

Presbyterianism and Schools

- The Education Act of 1696

by Andrew R. Middleton

Almost three hundred years ago, the Scottish Parliament passed an Act that was to have a profound impact upon the religious development of the Scottish Nation. It was a foundation for the modern Scottish educational system, and embodied a civil acceptance of the educational ideals of the Reformers. Presbyterianism in Scotland has from its inception shown a healthy concern for the education of the young. This article examines the growth of Presbyterian interest in the education of the young.

The reasons for the Act

The sixteenth century may be characterised as one of great educational and religious change. It began with the Renaissance, or the Rebirth of Learning, and this popular movement prepared the peoples of Europe for the Reformation. Education allowed the people to read and study the Word of God. The inevitable result of this change was the overthrow of Romish superstition and the collapse of Papal dominance. The leading Reformers, such as Calvin and Luther, supported the establishment of schools. Indeed, Martin Luther wrote, 'Even if there were no souls and there was not the least need of schools for the sake of the Scriptures and of God, this one reason would suffice to cause the establishment of the best schools everywhere, namely that the world needs accomplished men, and women also, for maintaining its outward temporal prosperity'¹.

The light of the true gospel spread throughout the nations of Europe, until it reached Scotland. Row comments, 'the Lord made his gospell and trueth to be more and more known, untill the tyme of the Reformation, whilk began in the yeare of God 1558'². The course of the Reformation differed in England and Scotland. In the former it spread from the nobility and clergy to the people, whereas in the second it moved from the people to the nobility. McCrie says 'In England the reigning powers took the lead, and the people followed, as best they might, in the wake of royal authority. In Scotland the people were converted to the Protestant faith before the civil power had moved a step in the cause; and when the legislature became friendly to the Reformation nothing remained for it to do but to ratify the profession which the nation had adopted.'³.

¹ MacInnes J., *The Evangelical Movement in the Highlands of Scotland 1688 to 1800*, The University Press, Aberdeen, 1951, p.221 (citing., J. Clarke, *Education in Scotland*, p.19).

² Row J., *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1842, p.9.

³ McCrie T., *The Story of the Scottish Church*, Free Presbyterian Publications, Glasgow, 1988, p.40

As the Scottish Parliament met on the 1 August 1560 they were presented with a petition for the abolition of Popery. According to Brown, 'Parliament wanted to know what they were to put in the place of the Romish error. It was not their part to formulate a Confession of Faith. Knox and his four friends were called on'⁴. The task says Calderwood, 'was gladelie undertaken, and within foure dayes after, this Confessioun following was presented'⁵. In December of the same year, Knox, six other ministers and thirty four elders constituted the Supreme Court of the Reformed Church of Scotland. This assembly, at the Magdalen Chapel, in Edinburgh devised the First Book of Discipline. Brown comments that it was useful in 'setting forth the Presbyterian form of Church Government in its leading features. It was derived, as they are careful to state, not from Geneva or France, but directly from the New Testament.'⁶.

Chapter 7 of the First Book of Discipline document reads, 'Seeing that God hath determined that his kirk here on earth shall be taught not by angels but by men, and seeing that men are borne ignorant of God and of all godlinesse, and seeing also he ceases to illuminate men miraculously, suddenly changing them as he did the Apostles and others in the primitive kirke: Of necessity it is that your honours be most careful for the vertuous education and godly up-bringing of the youth of this realm, if either ye now thirst unfainedly the advancement of Christ's glorie, or yet desire the continuance of his benefits to the generation following; for as the youth must succeed to us, so we ought to be carefull that they have knowledge and erudition to profit and comfort that which ought to be most deare to us, to wit, the kirk and spouse of our Lord Jesus.'⁷. Chapter 8 says, 'Thir two sorts of men, that is to say ministers [of the word] and the poore, together with schooles, when order shall be taken thereanent must be susteyned upon the charges of the kirk'⁸. Other sections advise the church officers with respect to the establishment of schools and the payment of masters. Rev. R.R. Sinclair quotes the above passages and comments, 'The bold and arrogant averments by Roman Catholic writers in modern times, that John Knox and his colleagues did not at all organise the foundation and fundamentals of true and comprehensive education in Scotland, are exposed as completely false'⁹.

However, the ideals of the Scottish Reformers were not immediately put into practice. There were still those who held to Romish tenets, and an uneducated people were more receptive to myth and superstition. The Baron and the chieftain did not follow the Reformation ideals preferring the unquestioning loyalty of an illiterate population. An Act of 1616 had said that each parish should have a school established within its

⁴ Brown T., *Church and State in Scotland 1560-1843*, Hodder and Stoughton, Edinburgh, 1891, p.5.

⁵ Calderwood D., *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1843, Vol.2., p.15.

⁶ Brown T., op. Cit., p.8.

⁷ Steuart W., *Collections and Observations concerning the Worship, Discipline and Government of the Church of Scotland*, 5th Ed., Edinburgh, 1837, p.66.

⁸ Steuart W., Op. Cit., p.77.

⁹ Sinclair Rev. R. R., *The First Book of Discipline (1560), Papers commemorating the Quarter-Centenary of the Scottish Reformation, Papers at the Synod of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland at Edinburgh in May 1960*, Free Presbyterian Publications, 1960, p.42.

boundaries 'if convenient means maybe had'. The unscrupulous exploited the terminology.

A period of momentous change

Following the 1616 Act, Scotland entered a period of civil and religious change. In the spring of 1617 King James attempted to introduce a more ceremonial form of worship into the Scottish church. McCrie records, 'In the king's chapel the English liturgy was ordered to be read daily; the communion was taken in a kneeling posture; and the roof of the venerable pile, for the first time since the Reformation, echoed to the sounds of choristers and instrumental music'¹⁰. The king wished to transform the mode of worship into an Episcopalian one and the Presbyterian's were fighting to resist such change. The 1618 General Assembly was held in Perth, and was mainly constituted of bishops and nobles, it proved willing to accept the sovereign's attempts create more similarity between the churches of his kingdoms¹¹. It appeared that Episcopacy was in complete ascendancy.

As Prelacy became dominant the Churches began to empty, and parts of Scotland were, once more, destitute of a gospel witness as faithful ministers like John Welch were banished¹². Despite these difficult circumstances, in the face of oppression from the sovereign and the bishops, there were revivals at Stewarton (1925) and the Kirk of Shotts (1630).

In 1625 James was succeeded by his son Charles. The duke of Buckingham soon after Charles I succession to the throne urged him to marry and his choice of wife was the Roman Catholic daughter of the Henry IV of France, Henrietta Maria. Charles had also inherited from his father a belief in the divine right of kings (this placed the sovereign above civil and ecclesiastical law). This led the king into conflict with the English Parliament, which he dissolved on several occasions, as they had asserted their right to free debate, disapproved of his Romish wife and refused to increase taxation to pay for his wars. Charles continued the task of imposing prelacy upon the Scottish church. He introduced the English liturgy, a quasi-popish book that the Puritans opposed, and this led to popular discontent¹³.

In Edinburgh this mood of protest against innovations led to action. On 26 February 1638, in Greyfriars churchyard the nobility, ministers and people gathered together

¹⁰ McCrie T., Op. Cit., p.110.

¹¹ This assembly ratified the Perth articles that stated,

1. Kneeling at the communion
2. Observance of certain holidays like Christmas, Easter and Pentecost
3. Episcopal confirmation
4. Private baptism
5. Private communion

¹² Rev. K.D. MacLeod gives an account of the banishment of John Welch, see, John Welch - 7. Banishment, *The Free Presbyterian Magazine*, February 1996, Vol. 101., No.2., p.48-53

¹³ McCrie records the famous account of its introduction by the Dean of Edinburgh, in 1637, that led to Janet Geddes hurling a stool at his head, with the words 'Villain, dost thou say mass at my lug!' (Op. Cit., p.141).

and renewed the National Covenant. The King was outraged, but unable to crush the movement he followed a conciliatory path. He yielded to the demands of his Scottish subjects and called a General Assembly that was to meet on 21 November 1638. At this Assembly, Alexander Henderson was unanimously elected moderator. MacPherson records what took place, 'The sessions of this Assembly lasted for about a month, and the work was very thoroughly and deliberately done. The Assemblies held under James were declared to be unfree, unlawful and null; prelacy was declared to be contrary to the principles of the Scottish Church and the Presbyterian government was restored. The prelates were solemnly deposed, the Articles of Perth, the Book of Canons, and the Liturgy were renounced. At the close of the Assembly on the 20th December, 1638, after he had pronounced the benediction, Henderson said:- 'We have now cast down the walls of Jericho; let him that rebuildeth them beware of the curse of Hiel, the Bethelite.''¹⁴. The King was enraged and pushed forward his preparations for war.

In 1640, Charles was defeated at Berwick by a Scottish army. This brought conflict in England, between Parliament and the Court. In August 1642, the first major clashes of the Civil War took place. On 12 June 1643, the Parliament called an Assembly of 'godly and judicious divines'. This body of divines was responsible for the directory of public worship, the shorter and larger catechism, the Westminster confession, they approved the Psalter and concluded in 1648 with a discussion of Jus Divinum¹⁵. In 1648, the captive King was put on trial as a tyrant and a traitor. On the afternoon of Sabbath 30th January 1649, he was beheaded in Whitehall.

The Covenanting party supported the monarchy, and the execution did not find favour in Scotland. They supported Charles II and help him back to the throne. In 1661, firmly in power, Charles II resolved to establish episcopacy in Scotland. By 1662, the faithful ministers in Scotland were being banished. Forced from their pulpits, conventicles of people gathered on the hillsides. While the Kings dragoons under Claverhouse gained notoriety for their barbarous acts. After Charles death in 1685, he was succeeded by his son James. An avowed Papist he continued the barbarity that had characterised his father's reign. Until in November 1688, a foreign King, William of Orange, landed in Torbay. This started a series of events that are referred to as the 'Glorious Revolution' in which James was deposed, and William crowned. In 1690, William passed a Toleration Act guaranteeing freedom of worship.

1690 restored peace to the Scottish Church. Freed from the turmoil that had been created by civil unrest, the minds of the Presbyterian leaders once more turned to education. As McCrie says, 'Several years of comparative peace ensued, during which the Assembly was chiefly occupied in reviving the old measures for promoting the

¹⁴ MacPherson J., *A History of the Church of Scotland from the earliest times down to the present day*, Alexander Gardner, London, 1901, p.189.

¹⁵ The issue of Jus Divinum, or Church government, sought to answer the objections raised by Dissenting Brethren. An important book in this debate has recently been reprinted by Naphtali Press (*Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici - The Divine Right of Church Government*, Edited Hall D.W., Naphtali Press, Dallas, 1995). Although, the last number session was held on 22 February 1648, the committee continued to meet less frequently, for the purpose of examining ministers, until 1652.

useful learning for which the early Presbyterian church was so much distinguished from the days of John Knox.¹⁶

The 1696 Act required the heritors and the minister of a parish to 'settle' a school. MacInnes explains that the 1696 Act closed the loopholes that had previously been exploited by the unwilling landlords, and provided the Church with a greater degree of civil authority to pursue its aims. 'The Act of 1696 was, in effect, the Act of 1616 with the addition of a coercive clause. Coercive sanction was, in the last resort, in the hands of the Church. This fact placed the Church in a strong position when it had to deal with passive or active obstruction on the part of the landlords.'¹⁷.

The effects of the 1696 Act

This Act provided the foundation for the Scottish Educational System. It gave the nation many temporal blessings and created a meritocracy which allowed the able child to proceed up the educational ladder. Rev. M. MacSween comments that 'In 1696 each parish had its own school. Education was regarded as desirable for its own sake and for its great benefit to the nation. The education of the poor was to be free.'¹⁸. Drummond and Bulloch share the same sentiment when they comment respecting the 1st Book of Discipline, 'it was intended to give a training in faith and character to every child, to inform his mind, to teach him to earn a livelihood, to make him a good citizen and an independent man, and to provide openings for an educational elite, whatever the social background'¹⁹.

The 1696 Act was far from perfect. Some parishes, such as Archnamurchan which was 90 miles long were very large, and yet they only had to provide a single school. The situation in the Highlands remained bleak for many years, and para-church organisations such as the Scottish Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) took the lead. The influence of such bodies has continued, and the biographies of both Rev. D. MacFarlane²⁰, and Rev D. MacDonald²¹, show the effect of these institutions on their own lives.

The consequences of the 1696 Act are summed up in the words of Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools. In 1878, following the nationalisation of schools in the 1872 Education Act, he wrote, 'The mass of the Scotch people are Presbyterians, and for them the national schools may be said to exist, just as the Roman Catholic and Episcopal schools respectively exist for these denominations. The public schools are

¹⁶ McCrie T., Op. Cit., p.431.

¹⁷ MacInnes J., Op. Cit., p.225.

¹⁸ MacSween Rev. M., *The Benefits of the Reformation, Papers commemorating the Quarter Centenary of the Scottish Reformation, Papers at the Synod of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland at Edinburgh in May 1960*, Free Presbyterian Publications, 1960, p.57.

¹⁹ Drummond A.L., Bullock J., *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843-1874*, St. Andrews Press, Edinburgh, 1975, p.84.

²⁰ Beaton Rev. D., *Memoir, Diary and Remains of the Rev. D. MacFarlane, Dingwall*, Inverness, 1929, p.2.

²¹ MacFarlane Rev. D., *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Donald MacDonald Shildaig, Ross-shire*, Glasgow, 1957, p.12.

to all intents and purposes denominational schools. Public and Presbyterian are practically interchangeable terms'²².

²² Mechie S., *The Church and Scottish Social Development 1780-1870*, Oxford University Press, 1960, p.152. Citing, *Report of the Scottish Educational Department, 1878-79*, p.173.