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150 Years of State Provision: Re-assessing the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872

In 1972 the journal *Scottish Educational Studies* (which later became *Scottish Educational Review*) published a special issue to mark the centenary of the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872, regarded as one of the most significant pieces of legislation in the nation's educational history. That assessment remains valid today and it is fitting that the 150th anniversary of the 1872 Act should also be recognised in this special issue of *SER*. The passing of the legislation was only achieved after a long struggle. Although the state had been involved in aspects of educational provision since the 1830s, there was a reluctance on the part of politicians to assume full responsibility for the system as a whole. Some were concerned about the financial implications, fearing a rise in taxation; others were worried about the risk to social stability that might follow from a better educated populace; yet others sought to protect the role of churches, which had for so long been the major providers of schooling. But the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation, linked to a rapid increase in population, meant that the old parish system, dating back to John Knox's proposals in the *Book of Discipline* (1560), was no longer fit for purpose. In any case, many children did not receive their schooling in parish schools but in a variety of other types of establishments of varying quality. The three reports of the Argyll Commission (1865, 1867, 1868) indicated that although standards of teaching were high in some parish and burgh schools (particularly in the north-east), there was considerable variation and that many adventure, charity and subscription schools were highly unsatisfactory. The case for a national system, funded by the state, managed by local boards, and subject to non-denominational inspection, was strong.

Although the argument for imposing order on an increasingly chaotic picture was powerful, initial attempts to progress legislation based largely on the recommendations of the Argyll Commission were unsuccessful. It was only after the 1870 Elementary Education Act for England was passed that the way was paved for reform in Scotland. The Scottish Act was not restricted to elementary education but, as will be seen from some of the contributions that follow, provision for post-elementary schooling remained patchy and uneven for several decades. The campaign for secondary education for all met with official resistance even after the Education (Scotland) Act of 1918. Nevertheless, both the 1872 and 1918 Acts represent important milestones in the development of the Scottish educational system, as will be seen from Lindsay **Paterson's** article.

The provisions of the Act were extensive, affecting pupils, parents, teachers, administrators, inspectors and local communities. Attendance at school

became compulsory for children aged 5 to 13. Parents were required to ensure attendance so that their children could acquire proficiency in reading, writing and arithmetic, and could be subject to sanctions if they failed to do so. They were also expected to pay fees, with some provision for those who were unable to do so: it was not until 1890 that fees for elementary schooling were abolished. Although major powers, notably financial decisions, were retained by the Scotch Education Department (SED) in London, and a temporary Board of Education in Edinburgh, day-to-day management of schools fell to elected School Boards. The Act laid down procedures for the transfer of existing schools to the new Boards, an operation that required sensitivity to local feeling and religious allegiance. Those in charge of Catholic and Episcopalian schools, unhappy with the Act's provisions for religious education and observance, remained outside the new structure (not joining the state system until 1918 when acceptable safeguards were offered). The School Boards were also responsible for the recruitment, appointment and dismissal of teachers: this too was an area of sensitivity, affecting teachers with long experience in the parish system, as well as the new entrants required for an expanded workforce.

There were some aspects of the Act that signalled good intentions rather than a clear plan of action. These included references to infant education and continuation classes for adults. It would take several decades before substantial provision in these areas was made. Likewise, it was well into the twentieth century before the educational needs of children with disabilities were given adequate recognition. The priority in 1872 was to establish a universal system for 5-13 year-olds, concentrating on 'mainstream' provision. The sheer scale of the operation meant that the specific needs of some learners were not catered for satisfactorily. Legislative reform is a cumulative process: no single piece of legislation can ensure that all requirements are covered. As weaknesses and omissions are identified, new laws and statutory instruments are introduced.

The contributions that follow are intended not only to review particular issues arising from the 1872 Act but also to refresh and challenge our understanding of its provisions. As a preliminary, the article by the editors examines the historiography of the Act: that is, how earlier writers have presented it and interpreted it at different times. Here certain interesting variations of emphasis will emerge – between, for example, those who see it from a limited educational perspective, and those who locate it within a broader social and political framework. There are also distinctions to be made between commentators who present a narrative of steady progress and those who take a much more critical line in assessing the strengths and limitations of the Act. This, in turn, opens up questions about appeals to the Scottish tradition in education, particularly those which invoke the concepts of 'democracy' and 'equality'. Do these concepts have real substance, or do they serve as part of a reassuring myth, designed to conceal uncomfortable truths? Part of the aim of this special issue is to encourage re-examination of standard interpretations.

Two articles deal with the period leading up to the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872, illustrating the slow journey to reform and the competing voices who tried to influence the form it took. Jane **McDermid** looks particularly at the schooling of the poor as it sought to respond to population expansion, regional variation in

provision, and the challenge of large-scale Catholic migration. She draws attention to the restricted educational opportunities for girls, but also to the important contribution of schoolmistresses, whose numbers steadily increased. Another theme referred to by McDermid – fractures within Presbyterianism, following the disruption of 1843 – is taken up in Ryan **Mallon's** paper on Presbyterian dissent and the campaign for educational reform. Drawing on a wide range of sources, he shows that arguments about the role of religion in any national system of education were not simply between the Church of Scotland and the Free Church. There were deep divisions within the various Protestant denominations, which served to delay the reform process. The conflicts were fuelled both by 'political' considerations and by personal rivalries among leading figures. This paper deepens understanding of the complexities of the events leading up to the 1872 Act and offers a nuanced interpretation of a critical period in Scottish educational history.

The centrality of religion is also reflected in two other contributions. John Stevenson charts the shifting position of the Church of Scotland, from absolute determination to avoid handing over its schools to state control, to a recognition that the political and social climate had changed in ways that challenged its authority, and finally to a willingness to compromise, despite its concerns about the dangers of secularism. Although the 1872 Act meant that the Church of Scotland lost direct control of the management of the parish schools, the preamble to the Act ensured that religious instruction could be continued according to custom. The composition of the elected School Boards, most of which contained the local minister, meant that religion continued to feature in the curriculum. **Stevenson** concludes that, although the Church of Scotland's influence was diminished by the Act, it redirected its energies through voluntary organisations designed to address the needs of the working-class.

Stephen **McKinney** and Roger **Edwards** examine the position of the Catholic and Episcopal Churches, which remained outside the scope of the 1872 Act because of anxieties about their denominational status and the form of religious instruction and observance in the new Board schools. The paper gives an illuminating account of the different types of Catholic and Episcopal schools, the financial challenges of maintaining a separate system, the contribution of religious orders in supporting educational provision, and the difficulty in recruiting, training and retaining suitably qualified teachers. Salary levels were lower than in the Board schools and there was a heavy reliance on pupil-teachers. It was not until the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act that a compromise was reached which allowed the transfer of the Catholic and Episcopal schools to the state system, subject to various provisions which recognised their distinct religious character.

The special issue concludes with Lindsay **Paterson's** article which links the provisions of the 1872 and 1918 Acts; together these may be regarded as the foundation blocks of Scottish education in the twentieth century. He identifies two main themes, the first relating to secondary education, the second to educational governance. Post-elementary schooling following the 1872 Act presented a patchy and complex picture, with various types of institution offering different routes for the minority of learners able to stay on after the leaving age. Paterson offers a clear account of courses of study open to these learners and draws attention to the importance of the Leaving Certificate, introduced by the SED in 1888. His second

theme deals with the way in which the governance of the national system was first established and subsequently reformed. This raised difficult questions about the relationship between central government and, first, local School Boards, later educational authorities. The growing professionalism of teachers was also a key factor in reshaping the nature of the educational policy community within an evolving political democracy. It was thus possible to redefine the Scottish educational tradition in ways that prepared for the vast expansion of the educational system in the second half of the twentieth century. Paterson's conclusion is that '1872 started a process which 1918 made into a stable system that, in significant respects, persists to the present'.

It is hoped that these contributions, taken together, not only offer new insights into the recent history of Scottish education, but also set an agenda for future scholars. There is still plenty of research material to be mined in a variety of sources, including parliamentary debates, official records, local archives, professional journals and newspaper reports.