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The Journey Towards the Education (Scotland) Act of 1918

By

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This year marks the centenary of the Education (Scotland) Act, 1918, which is rightly understood as a defining point in the history of contemporary state-funded Catholic schools in Scotland. This is the first of a series of articles that will explore the historical background to this Act, the Act itself and the impact of the Act on the growth and development of Catholic schools in Scotland.

The history and symbolism of state-funded Catholic schooling in Scotland of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can deflect our attention away from the earlier history. It is important to note some key points about the long-standing tradition of education in the Catholic Church in Scotland. Education in the early stages of the Catholic Church in Scotland was associated with the monastic systems. The monasteries of the Celtic Church that had been initiated by St Columba normally included a form of school to instruct the novices. Probably around the seventh century some of these monastic schools would educate other young men from out with the monastery. The curriculum would most likely be focussed on learning Latin and perhaps Greek and studying Christianity. The demise of the Celtic Church and the rise of the 'Roman' Church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed the arrival of the Benedictine, Augustinian and Cistercian orders; all of which were to become established in Scotland and schools were attached to some of the monasteries. The parochial and diocesan systems were also established in Scotland. Grammar schools grew beside the cathedrals and monasteries and more rudimentary schools were founded. The arrival of Dominican friars proved to be very providential for schooling and the Grammar schools in Aberdeen, Edinburgh, St. Andrews and Ayr were all located on the grounds of Dominican foundations. By the fifteenth century, schooling had evolved in a variety of forms. Song or *Sang* schools, attached to cathedrals and collegiate churches became popular. There were also Grammar schools, reading or 'English' schools that provided basic education for boys, some small schools for girls and private schools run by local lairds. The role of the monk or friar in schooling began to be supplemented and, in some places, eventually superseded by the role of the parish priest. Some of the priests would run a small school that addressed reading and writing and religion. Many of the town councils (e.g. Ayr, Edinburgh) contributed to the support of the Church-run schools and in time some of these schools devolved to council control and became burgh schools. Around the fifteenth century some individuals established privately owned and run 'adventure' schools that were operated for a profit.

The effects of the Reformation in the sixteenth century were that the schools were to pass from the control of the Church or disappear in their original form; the burgh schools were to survive the reformation. Any systematic revival of Catholic schooling in Scotland was to be problematic in the period from the Reformation up until the nineteenth century because the penal laws presented a major challenge. The Act of 1700 'for preventing the growth of popery' prohibited Catholics from being employed

as teachers and being involved in the governance of schools. The wealthier Catholics had the resources to appoint private tutors or send their children to Catholic schools in France or Belgium. The French Revolution disrupted this overseas education in 1793 and the children were sent to schools in England. The vast majority of the (small) Catholic population sent their children to the local schools that would often be run according to a Protestant ethos. There is evidence of some small Catholic schools in the Highlands and North East in the late seventeenth century (these were areas where the Catholic community was quite strong). Catholic schools were set up by churches in Edinburgh (1788), Glenlivet (1790) and Aberdeen (1791).

The beginning of the nineteenth century was a period of significant change for Catholic schooling. The Catholic population of Glasgow had grown as a result of attracting highland Catholics to join the workforce. This was augmented by an influx of Irish Catholic immigrants, a process that had started in the late eighteenth century. There were no official Catholic schools in the City up until 1817, though there were a few adventure schools that were run by Catholics. The Catholic population had grown by this point to the extent that schools were feasible and sustainable. This was an era marked by schools being founded in Glasgow. Dr Thomas Chalmers (one of the leaders of the disruption in 1843 that would form the Free Church) was appointed to two Church of Scotland parishes in Glasgow, the Tron in 1815 and St John's in 1819, and he set up schools in the city that were supervised by the local Kirk session. The city authorities also began to set up schools. In 1817 the Catholic Schools Society was set up in Glasgow with the support of Kirkman Finlay, Member of Parliament for Glasgow Burghs and a highly successful merchant. He was a Protestant and it is reported that he felt he owed this support because many of his workers were Catholics. Many historians attach great significance to his well-publicised altruistic actions, although it is less well publicised that he faced fierce opposition and even resentment from some fellow Protestants. By 1818 the Society had opened two schools and by 1825 it had opened five schools in total. Dr Chalmers, whose sermons were highly popular, preached to raise money for the Catholic schools. Catholic schools were also opened in Blantyre, Paisley, Greenock, Airdrie, Port Glasgow, Dumfries, Edinburgh and Leith between the early 1820s and 1832. These developments were, of course, within the context of The Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829. There was a very interesting series of developments in the middle of the nineteenth century that would be very influential on the growth and consolidation of Catholic schools. In 1847 the Catholic Poor Schools Committee was established to help Catholic schools secure a share of the government grants that could be acquired to support schools. The pupil-teacher initiative provided opportunities for young people to be employed and advance themselves, though the demands of both teaching and studying could be very exacting and they could suffer from exploitation. Large numbers of Irish Catholics fleeing a series of famines increased the Catholic population dramatically and added to the number of Catholic children to be educated. The role of the newly arrived religious orders and congregations was to prove crucial for the improvement of the quality of the educational provision and the enhancement of the reputation of Catholic school education. The Ursuline Sisters were brought to Edinburgh in 1836 and were followed to Scotland by the Sisters of Mercy and the Franciscan sisters (1846), The Good Shepherd Sisters (1851), the Sisters of Charity (1860) and the Little Sisters of the Poor (1862). The Marist brothers arrived in 1858, followed by the Society of Jesus and the Vincentians (1859) and the Passionists (1865).

In the period that preceded the Education (Scotland) Act 1872 there were some serious challenges for Catholic schools. The schools that were opened and run by the Religious were deemed to be among the best schools in the country but there remained a shortage of properly qualified teachers, especially male teachers. The vast majority of the schooling was for children at the primary level and there was little education at the secondary level. The poverty experienced by the majority of the Catholic population was a major issue, particularly in Glasgow and the industrial towns. The attendance of the children at school was often irregular, as they would be required to work to add to the family income.

The next article will examine The Education (Scotland) Act 1872, the consequences of this Act for Catholic schools and the lead up to the Education (Scotland) Act, 1918.

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A full list of references is available on request.

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