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A Scottish Education Milestone

By

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This 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.

The Argyll Commission, led by George Campbell the 8th Duke of Argyll, was set up in 1864 to examine the state of the school provision that was available at that time. The Commission published three reports between 1865 and 1868 and reported on the wide variety and uneven quality of schooling in Scotland. This would contribute to the introduction of the Education (Scotland) Act 1872. The Act was to have a profound influence on Scottish school education. One of the main aims of the Act was to produce a state system of elementary or primary education. Schooling became compulsory for children aged 5 to 13. The school system was to be organised by a Board of Education for Scotland and the individual schools were to be administered by local school Boards. Around 1,000 of these local Boards were set up in parishes and in burghs and had to have at least five members and no more than fifteen members. These 'public schools' would be open to children of all denominations. In section 68, the Act outlined the conditions of the 'conscience clause'. Parents had the right to withdraw their children from any instruction in religious subjects and from religious observance. There was a new understanding that the religious and secular dimensions of the school should be separated. The instruction in religious subjects and religious observance was to be given either at the beginning or end of the day or at both the beginning and end of the day. Voluntary schools could transfer or continue to exist but there would be no more building grants and no aid from the rates, nor exemption from the rates.

The Catholic Church decided not to transfer their schools under the conditions of the 1872 Act. The Church wished to protect the denominational status of their schools and they were anxious about the status of the new Board schools, suspecting that they would favour the interests of the Church of Scotland or lead to a secular system of school education. They were also concerned that there would be no compensation for the schools that were transferred to the state. The Catholic schools now faced a number of serious challenges. The withdrawal of building grants was compounded by the need to ensure that the Catholic children attended school up to the age of thirteen in accordance with the Act. The Catholic schools struggled to acquire enough staff and continued to be over reliant on the pupil-teachers. The men and women who had obtained Catholic teaching qualifications had travelled to Hammersmith, Liverpool and Wandsworth in England to study for them. This was costly and beyond the means of many families. The members of the religious orders and congregations were highly qualified and, crucially, they were able to subsidise the running costs of some of their schools. However, there were too many teachers in Catholic schools who were under qualified. In 1886 there were 28.9% women and 24.4% men who were not trained teachers in the public schools. The figures for Catholic schools were 58.5% women

and 38.5% men. This concern began to be addressed by the arrival of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Namur. In 12 June 1893, Sister Mary of St. Philip (Frances Lescher) and her cousin Sister Mary of St Wilfrid (Mary Adela Lescher) arrived from Mount Pleasant, Liverpool to initiate the process of establishing a Catholic Training College for women in Glasgow. Notre Dame Training College was opened in Dowanhill on the 14th of January 1895. Sister Mary of St Wilfrid was the first Principal. Laymen and Marist brothers could train for a two-year programme in Primary Education at training centres in Glasgow while resident at St Kentigern's Hostel from 1908 to the early 1920s. St. Kentigern's offered the courses in Religious Instruction that would support candidates in the preparation for the Religious Teaching Certificate. The Catholic teachers faced very difficult working conditions. The number of Catholic children attending school increased and the extant building stock, which was often in poor condition, struggled to accommodate them. Treble (1978) reports a marked pay differential between those working in the state schools and those working in the Catholic schools. In 1917, an Assistant master in an elementary school in Glasgow received £154, 12s per annum in a Board school, whereas the counterpart in the Catholic schools received £94, 1s 6d. The limited resources available created enormous problems in trying to remunerate Catholic teachers at a fairer and more equitable rate.

Although schooling had now become compulsory, with some legitimate exceptions, attendance at Catholic schools could still be erratic. This was partly due to the poverty of the Catholic families. Some children did not possess warm clothing and footwear for the winter months, nor could the families afford the small fees. The Saint Vincent de Paul Society had grown rapidly in Glasgow from the mid 1800s and was to provide invaluable support to many of the poorer families and help the children to attend school. They provided clothing, footwear, free meals and could underwrite the small fees and pay for books and slates. The support of Celtic Football Club enabled the SVDP to provide free meals for the poorer children in the parishes of St. Mary's, Sacred Heart and St. Michael's in the east end of Glasgow in the late nineteenth century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century further challenges arose for the Catholic schools. The school leaving age was raised to 14 in 1901 and this exacerbated the overcrowding problem in many Catholic schools. The total number of Catholic pupils had grown exponentially from 12,000 in 1872 to 94,000 in 1918/19. Three quarters of these pupils were being educated in schools within the Archdiocese of Glasgow which at that time encompassed a much wider area in the West of Scotland. The pupil teacher system was abolished and this had a detrimental impact on teacher recruitment. Much of the focus of the Catholic educational endeavour was on primary schooling and there were very limited opportunities for Catholic children to progress through the stages of secondary education and enter into Higher Education. The war brought rising costs and the Catholic community struggled to meet the financial demands to maintain the schools. The Education (Scotland) Act 1918 was to offer a resolution to many of the challenges facing Catholic schools. This will be the focus of the next article in this series.

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A full list of references is available on request.

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