

The Church of Scotland and the Origins of Mandatory Schooling: The Literature

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I hereby pledge on my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on  
this work.

The Scottish Education Act of 1633 provided the foundation for the renowned public-school system that exists in Scotland to this day. Simultaneously, it turned Scotland into one of the first countries to dedicate its revenue toward making schooling mandatory and accessible for all children.<sup>1</sup> Though education has been a central force in Scotland for centuries, the historiography has widely neglected the importance of the Education Act of 1633 and the direct role that the Kirk had in making that legislation happen.

The Church of Scotland's role in pursuing mandatory education did not stem from economic motivations; rather, the Reformation had instilled the idea that each person is responsible for their own salvation and must therefore have the ability to read the Bible on their own. The Kirk eventually took this desire for widespread literacy further, advocating for children to be taught basic skills in writing, arithmetic, and Latin in addition to reading. Many people in the seventeenth century—most often those who enjoyed a high socioeconomic status—argued that it is unwise to educate people above their station in life.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Scotland struggled immensely with raising revenue for the state, and it is therefore striking that Parliament chose to prioritize education in tax-making laws when countries such as England were prioritizing national defense. It is largely the influence of the Kirk on Scottish society that allowed for locally funded parish schools to be written into law in spite of the fact that many did not view education (for girls and the poor) as a basic right. It is unfitting that such a unique and groundbreaking piece of legislation has not been afforded more historical attention than brief

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<sup>1</sup> Prussia is widely believed to have been the first country to make education compulsory; however, the Scottish Education Act of 1633 preceded the 1776 decree by Frederick the Great (which laid out plans for a primary education system) by well over a century.

<sup>2</sup> For more on views of education in this era, see David Cressy, *Education in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975). Though this monograph is focused on England, the views expressed were relevant to much of Western Europe, including Scotland, in the seventeenth century.

mentions in journal articles and the occasional chapter in a monograph on Scottish or education history.

While no monographs are dedicated solely to the origins of public schools in Scotland, a limited amount of literature exists on the Education Act of 1633 and the Kirk's role in implementing compulsory education. This literature takes the form of book chapters and sections of scholarly articles. While helpful, it is difficult to get an in-depth view of the early years of parish-based education from individual pieces of literature. To form a thorough understanding of Scottish Education Act of 1633 and the role that the Kirk played in making it happen, it is necessary to combine various pieces of literature that have been written on this topic, ranging from sources on the Reformed church to general histories of Scotland and of education.

*The Edinburgh History of Education in Scotland* does not devote much space to the early Education Acts and parish schools in the Early Modern period; instead, its focus is largely on early universities in Scotland which, unlike primary schools, were fairly developed by the start of the seventeenth century. Regardless, it is helpful in providing background on Scottish educational values, and the small portion of the book that discusses primary education in the 1600s offers a look into what primary schooling looked like prior to the plantation of a nationwide school system. The chapters "Education in the Century of Reformation" by Stephen Mark Holmes and "Urban Schooling in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-century Scotland" by Lindy Moore reflect on the state of education in the time leading up to the 1633 act. Holmes' chapter centers on the Scottish Reformation's role in education (and what he deems to be misconceptions about that role), whereas Moore's details the lives of urban children in and out of school.

A historian of Christianity and author, Holmes begins his chapter by stating that "It is a commonplace that 'the Scottish Reformation' of 1560 . . . led to the establishment of a system of

education available to the whole nation.”<sup>3</sup> He follows this with a quotation from a Scottish minister that credits *The First Book of Discipline* (1560) with the Act for Settling of Schools (1696), which built on and improved the Education Act of 1633. Holmes does not mention the 1633 act’s role in the plantation of schools. In a diversion from this “commonplace” historical argument, Holmes uses this chapter to challenge the notion that the Protestant reformed Kirk was directly responsible for the establishment of universal schooling. Holmes denies that it is even accurate to describe the Scottish Reformation as a Protestant movement, arguing that the Reformation was a series of movements within both the Protestant and Catholic church. This argument threatens to unravel the Protestant Church’s claim that it is responsible for the success of the parish-based school system that formed in Scotland. While Holmes is correct in his assertion that Catholics also cared about educating children, he fails to acknowledge that the suppression of Catholicism by the Kirk makes it unlikely that Catholics had much power over schools. Furthermore, elementary and grammar schools in early modern Scotland only reflected the Protestant church,<sup>4</sup> which would not be the case if the Catholic church had had a hand in forming the school system.

Moore, a scholar of gender history, women’s history, and education history, outlines Scottish urban life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, focusing specifically on schools. Moore’s work is largely quantitative, and it is evident early on in the chapter that she is focusing on a very small portion of the Scottish population: “less than a tenth of the population lived

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Mark Holmes, “Education in the Century of Reformation,” in *The Edinburgh History of Education in Scotland*, eds. Robert Anderson, Mark Freeman, and Lindsay Paterson (Edinburgh: University Press, 2015) 57.

<sup>4</sup> Most early schooling was done inside parish churches themselves (which were Protestant following the Reformation), and students were taught by ministers who used *The First Book of Discipline* as a guideline for their teaching.

[there] at the beginning of the period,”<sup>5</sup> and the growth rate was nearly unpredictable due to the diseases and military violence that routinely killed off those in towns and cities. Moore does briefly mention the “famous Education Acts...of 1633”<sup>6</sup> and, unlike Holmes, gives the act credit for being one of the first to work on implementing a national school system. In terms of school life, Protestantism was naturally central to the curriculum. Students were taught how to read and write in the Scots language. Boys were also taught Latin, while girls were taught domestic skills such as sewing. There was also a growing emphasis on musical study as the seventeenth century progressed, primarily because of the importance of choirs in church life. Reminiscent of modern times, teachers in early modern Scotland struggled financially because the pay was inadequate for the cost of living in urban areas. Women were allowed to teach, but they were paid even more poorly than men. Moore focuses heavily on the gaps in learning and teaching opportunities between males and females, as well as upper and lower class. She notes that while schooling in this era was theoretically equal opportunity, it was not in practice.

The most useful secondary source for this project is located in T. C. Smout’s 1969 *A History of the Scottish People, 1560-1830*. Part one of the monograph, “The Age of Reformation, 1560-1690,” provides an in-depth study of how changes within the Kirk had a ripple effect throughout Scotland. Chapter three, “The Social Impact of the Reformed Church,” is particularly informative about the Kirk’s push for the education of youth. All that the Church had to work with in terms of building a school system was the academic base left over from a Catholic-controlled Scotland. This base mainly consisted of universities, and the curriculum was rigid and

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<sup>5</sup> Lindy Moore, “Urban Schooling in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-century Scotland,” in *The Edinburgh History of Education in Scotland*, eds. Robert Anderson, Mark Freeman, and Lindsay Paterson (Edinburgh: University Press, 2015) 79.

<sup>6</sup> Moore, 81.

outdated. Essentially, the Kirk had to start from scratch. Still, the parish-based school system picked up moving into the seventeenth century, with nearly every burgh in Scotland having access to schooling—even if the minister had to take on the role of schoolmaster himself.<sup>7</sup> In part two, Smout discusses the complexity of actually implementing the Kirk's changes; the investment into parish schools and efforts to improve the lives of the poor entailed citizens making adjustments, big and small, to their lifestyles. A prime example of this is the fact that children spending hours of their day in school put an extra burden on other members of their family who had to compensate for the lost labor.

Further complicating the Reformation process, the Kirk often lacked the cohesion that would likely have made the transition to a Reformed Scotland smoother. Forces outside of the Protestant Church likewise threatened the success of the Reformation. Instability in the Church translated to instability in society, schools being no exception. In the Scottish Highlands, which were vastly independent from the Lowlands,<sup>8</sup> clung to Catholicism well into the seventeenth century and beyond. The Kirk and the state—fearing that the Highlands would disturb the order these institutions were attempting to establish throughout the nation—became active in suppressing the freedoms of Highland clans from the end of the 1500s and into the next century. Having the opposite effect of submission and conformity by the Highlanders, the suppression of Highland culture (understandably) bred resentment. Over the next century, the Highlands came to resemble Ireland far more closely than Lowland Scotland.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> T.C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People, 1560-1830* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons) 1969, 87-89.

<sup>8</sup> That is, the Highlands were distinct from the Lowlands culturally, socially, economically, and religiously.

<sup>9</sup> R.A. Houston and I.D. Whyte, eds., *Scottish Society 1500-1800* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: University Press), 1989, 19.

Scotland is unique in that its people have long viewed education as a core part of their culture and national identity. It is impossible to separate the respect that Scots have for their schools from the deeply ingrained cultural influence of the Kirk. John Stevenson, a former Kirk minister and General Secretary of the Church's Department of Education, asserts that "the history of Scottish education is *inseparable* from its relationship with the Church in Scotland."<sup>10</sup> Understanding the origins of the public school system in Scotland is essential to understanding Scotland itself. The current historiography on the social, cultural, religious, and economic history of Scotland is inadequate for truly delving into the complex impacts that the Education Act of 1633 and the Kirk's hand in it.

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<sup>10</sup> John Stevenson, *Fulfilling a Vision: The Contribution of the Church of Scotland to School Education, 1772-1872* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications) 2012, ix. Emphasis added.

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