

Educating Scotland:

How the Relationship between Church and State Put Schooling at the Heart of Scottish Culture

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HIST 298

Dr. Ferrell

December 6, 2019

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

Abstract

Education has long been a defining aspect of Scottish culture, setting the country apart from the rest of the world in its dedication to the schooling of youth. Coinciding with the onset of the Reformation, the Church of Scotland (or Kirk, as it is often called) paved the way to a national school system, advocating for schools to be established in every parish, burgh, and city. Making education accessible throughout Scotland was a daunting task, requiring perseverance and, critically, revenue. The latter necessitated cooperation with the State which, unlike the Church, had the power to tax. The Education Act of 1633 gave economic support and legal backing for the establishment of schools that Kirk deemed necessary for the preservation and advancement of the nation. Though the Church and State were unsuccessful in creating a truly national and equitable school system until over two centuries later, the years between the start of the Reformation and the 1633 education law were integral to shaping the future of Scottish education.

Education is the foundation of society, and no country has better acknowledged this than Scotland. The schooling of youth has long been at the core of Scottish culture, politics, and economics. The value that the Scots have historically placed on education is inextricably linked with the commanding force that the Church of Scotland (commonly referred to as the Kirk) has exerted over the nation for centuries. The Kirk's focus on scholarship dates back to the Medieval period with the establishment of universities, monastic schools, and—to a lesser extent—grammar schools. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, the Scottish Reformation pushed the Kirk towards a more aggressive stance on education, causing Reformers to work toward education becoming a more consistent presence throughout the country. This religious shift marked the beginning of a new Scotland determined to save the soul of the nation through schooling.¹

The Church of Scotland was a force to be reckoned with, and it was capable of enacting remarkable changes within Scottish religion and society. This influence only increased as the Early Modern period progressed, and the Reformation became stronger. As impressive as the Kirk's sociocultural effects were, however, the stability of movements like implementing a school system ultimately depended on the support of Scottish lawmakers and their ability to provide economic backing for public education. The Education Act of 1633 was the first substantial legislative attempt at improving the chances for the success of schooling throughout Scotland.² While the Kirk provided the ideal of a free and equal education for all children that

¹ The Reformation was a political-religious movement to push Scotland (and much of Europe) towards Protestantism. The Highlands of Scotland remained primarily Catholic and resisted the intervention of the Kirk in their social practices. As such, the Reformation's effects on education and Scottish culture remained largely confined to the Lowlands in the Early Modern period. In this paper "Scotland" is should be understood to mean only "Lowland Scotland."

² The Act of Privy Council in 1616 was an earlier version of the Education Act of 1633, but little documentation exists on this act; there passing of the 1633 act strongly suggests that the legislation in 1633 did not have much impact on Scotland and therefore needed revision.

would support their dedication to Protestantism, Parliament provided the economic means to make that ideal a reality. The relationship between religion and legislation in early modern Scotland was deeply interdependent; the focus on creating a national education system was born of the Kirk's advocacy for schools, but it could not have been realized without Parliament prioritizing education in its tax laws. The act for the plantation of schools, passed on June 18, 1633, was the basis for those tax laws that made public education possible. While the effectiveness of the Education Act of 1633 is questionable, as is the Kirk's relatively unchecked control over Scotland, the renowned school system in Scotland would not exist were it not for the early steps taken by the Church and the State to educate the Scottish people.

As aforementioned, the Education Act of 1633 served as a foundation for education legislation in Scotland, not as a final solution to education issues. The law is ambitious—demanding that a school be placed in every parish and burgh and that landowners pay taxes to support this endeavor (see Appendix A)—but it does not sufficiently address the numerous issues that would arise with implementing higher taxes on a nation already struggling with sparse resources and poor standards of living. In rural areas, Scots lived mainly off of subsistence farming, and the majority of landowners were not nobles but common people struggling to make ends meet with the meager taxes that their tenants could afford. The added burden of a tax for schools was, predictably, an unwelcome prospect. Furthermore, lawmakers did not include an efficient way for tax collecting to be enforced.³ In rural parishes, the people's reliance on subsistence farming meant that putting all children in school would add a burden for adult family members who had to shoulder the labor that would normally have been shared with younger

³ The Education Act gave the power of taxing to bishops; in the event that landowners did not pay their tax to the Church, bishops were allowed to seize all land and assets. However, the law is unclear on how this process would be regulated.

relatives. In the towns, the constant threat of disease and the declining birth rate meant that there were more pressing issues to be addressed than education.

In an attempt to address those issues, the Church gave as much attention to poor relief as they did to education; by tying together the issues of poverty and lack of education, the Church and State were able to prioritize education while also addressing a major factor that frequently prevented families from sending their children to school.⁴ In his monograph *A History of the Scottish People: 1560-1830*, historian T.C. Smout discusses the challenges of educating poor children and one way in which the Church sought to alleviate monetary strain on parents so that their children would be able to continue their education rather than staying home to work.

At [the seventeenth century] the parents of poor children could seldom let them stay [in school] much beyond the age of eight unless they won a bursary. While he attended, the child worked hard. There were no official school holidays during the year, though as it was impossible to stop country children being withdrawn at harvest time many masters recognized the facts of peasant life and closed for a month or more in the summer.⁵

If a student showed enough potential, he or she might have been granted a bursary—a scholarship—to aid them in continuing their education up to the university level. Still, as Smout noted, even this financial aid was often not enough to keep peasant children in school year round due to the demands of farm life.

In attempting to establish a national school system in Scotland, the lack of foresight displayed by lawmakers with the Education Act of 1633 was a reflection of the absence of planning by religious leaders. *The First Book of Discipline*, written by the leaders of the Reformed Church of Scotland in 1560, is the earliest Reformation-era document that laid out guidelines for the education of youth (see Appendix B). These guidelines naturally prioritized

⁴ T.C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People, 1560-1830* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969) 87-89.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

faith and obedience to the Church's doctrines above all else, with the Reformation having instilled the belief that all people, no matter how young, were responsible for their own salvation. The Reformers were unique in focusing on equal access to schools to achieve the goal of national salvation, and this is the key reason why the Kirk was so determined (and successful) in promoting education. Still, the writers of the *First Book* were somewhat naïve in their lofty expectations of Scottish society. While it is not unlikely that Scots embraced the idea of their children receiving a basic education, the reality of the times is that most people in the Early Modern period were simply doing their best to survive; they did not have the luxury of thinking of the future that educating their children could offer. The Kirk was simultaneously aware of this fact while also unwilling to relinquish their desire to see every Scot schooled—at minimum, to the point of being able to read and interpret the Bible.

One of the most notable advocates for education was Reformer and minister John Knox, one of the founders of the Presbyterian Church. Having based his views on Calvinism, Knox assumed that all people were inherently evil and could be saved only by being taught the ways of Protestantism in their youth. He did not, however, solely argue for children to be educated in the Christian faith. Knox felt that schooling in languages (particularly Latin), grammar, logic, and rhetoric was also essential for life preparation. Believing more or less in equal educational opportunity regardless of socioeconomic status, Knox also instructed the Church to provide funds so that promising but underprivileged students would have the means to attend college as they grew older.⁶ One of the writers of *The First Book of Discipline*, Knox used his pull within the Kirk to make his views on education included in the official doctrine for religious practices.

⁶ Smout, 450.

The clearest example of the vehemence with which the Church sought to reform education—and thereby the nation—can be seen in the disdain that Knox held for any variance from pure Protestant values, variance which Knox asserted was the root of societal problems and could be solved with proper education. A radical for the cause of Protestant reform, Knox openly decried what he saw as the unholy corruption of the Church, State, and schools.

Thus having gained men chief in Church and State for their use, then they went to the corrupting of the universities, being the Seminaries of all Liberal Education. This likewise they did effectuate; first, by the Overseers connivance to the looseness of life in young people; next, by the bad example of the Seniors, the Juniors were invited to do mischief. Then the Teachers, by their bad influence, did corrupt, namely, in Theology, all sound Doctrine. And for this purpose, the earnest study of the Old Testament in the Original Hebrew was cried down, as beseeming rather men of the Synagogue, then those of the Christian schools.⁷

This excerpt of Knox's reflection on the Reformation and his role changing the Church provides an explanation for his urgency in reforming the Church and State's actions regarding education. Seeing corruption in the universities, Knox believed it necessary to begin schooling at an early age so as to ensure that children carried the beliefs of pure Protestantism with them into adulthood and, in turn, into the Church and the government. In short, Knox felt that there was a flow of corruption beginning at the top of the social hierarchy that needed to be broken to make way for a new and Godly nation.⁸

Even without the legal backing for and with the barriers posed to education in the years leading up to 1633, the Kirk experienced some success in establishing schools in various localities. Many of these "schools" were simply the churches themselves, with the minister acting as schoolmaster. With no official curriculum, lessons generally consisted of Bible study,

⁷ John Knox, "To the Reader," in *The Historie of the Reformation of the Church of Scotland; Containing Five Books: Together With Some Treatises Conducing To The History* (London: John Raworth for George Thomason and Octavian Pullen, 1644) 8-9. Quote transcribed; see Appendix C for original.

⁸ Though Knox was specifically discussing the corruption of university education in the quote above, his views remained relevant to lower education.

basic reading and writing exercises, singing hymns, and occasionally the teaching of Latin. The process of making education accessible and reliable was undeniably an uphill battle—as historian T.C. Smout noted, “Primary education . . . was hamstrung from the start by lack of finances”⁹—yet the determination of the Church of Scotland and Scottish Parliament between the years of 1560 and 1633 set off a chain of actions that would have significantly positive effects on the nation in the coming centuries.

Between the onset of the Reformation and the Education Act of 1633, the Kirk was beginning to establish schools in both rural parishes and urban areas. While not near as prominent as the universities that had existed since medieval times, primary and grammar schools were gaining popularity throughout the Lowlands, with attendance by students of all backgrounds rising. Predictably, there was a disparity between access to schools in rural versus urban areas. Towns were more densely populated, which led to more of a demand for education than in the smaller communities of rural parishes. Only between 3 and 5 percent of Scots lived in towns with a population higher than ten thousand.¹⁰ This means that the vast majority of the population in Scotland made up the rural burghs that were more isolated from the academic growth that urban areas experienced. Additionally, children living in urban areas were more likely to have a need for formal education; children who were set to follow in their parents’ footsteps and become farmers would not require the same skills as children who would have the opportunity to become artisans and merchants.¹¹

The stance that Scotland took on education notably distinguished it from the rest of Europe and the world at large. There were plenty of individual advocates for the education of

⁹ Smout, 87.

¹⁰ Houston and Whyte, 6.

¹¹ Or so argued some elite intellectuals of the time. For more views on educational rights in early modern Britain, see David Cressy, *Education in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975).

youth in early modern Europe, particularly within the sphere of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, two movements that strongly encouraged free thinking and inquiry into the workings of society and human nature. Where Scotland differs is that the Kirk and many policy makers did not include caveats in their push for access to schooling; unlike countries such as England and France, the Scots—for the most part—did not seek to deny education based on gender or socioeconomic status once the Reformation had taken root. Because Scotland's reasoning behind equal access to education was for the salvation of the nation and not solely for scholarly and/or economic pursuits, Scottish Reformers did not see it as prudent to restrict education to the elite males of society as was the case in other countries.¹²

None of this is to say that Scottish views on schooling were free of gender and socioeconomic bias; the distinctions between men and women, rich and poor are deeply rooted in early modern European society, and Scotland was no exception. The simple lack of documentation that exists on women and the poor in this era is telling of how these two groups were marginalized in Scottish society, even though both were integral to keeping social and economic systems functioning by providing a substantial workforce.¹³ The working class had little voice in society mainly due to their not being able to provide the State with as much tax revenue as the wealthy. Still, the focus on poor relief meant that a low socioeconomic status was not necessarily a deterrent for impoverished males from receiving a quality education.

The marginalization of women did, on the other hand, affect the education of female students. This was most probably due to the inherent misogyny present in the Church and

¹² The first education act in Scotland, passed in 1496 by James IV, mandated that the eldest sons of barons be educated. The purpose of this act was to ensure that prominent heirs would have the skills to lead when their time came. Thus, those without political power (women and the poor) were not considered in this early education law.

¹³ R.A. Houston and I.D. Whyte, eds., "Women in the Economy and Society of Scotland, 1500-1800," *Scottish Society 1500-1800* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: University Press, 1989) 134-141.

Scotland at large, both before and after the Reformation, something that trickled down into much of Scottish society.¹⁴ Though the Kirk believed that girls should be given the same basic education as boys, the school experience of female students was in practice quite different than that of male students.

They are taught what their parents or guardians judge it as necessary or useful for them to learn; and they are taught nothing else. Every part of their education tends evidently to some purpose; either to improve the natural attractions of their person, or to form their mind to reserve, to modesty, to chastity, and to economy: to render them both likely to become the mistresses of a family, and to behave properly when they have become such.¹⁵

Girls were allowed to—and indeed encouraged to—attend school, but this did not mean that they had received an escape from the deeply-rooted gender roles that had existed long before the Reformation and continued well past the Education Act of 1633.

The persistent gender and socioeconomic-based discrimination throughout early modern Scotland makes it clear that the Church and State of Scotland did not succeed in making education equally accessible for all Scottish youth. Additionally, the fact that the Education Acts continued to be revised by Scottish Parliament into the twentieth century strongly indicates that the first Education Act of 1633 was inadequate in implementing a national school system. Even the successes of education policy were limited to the Scottish Lowlands and would not reach the Highlands for some time, meaning that the “national” school system was not national at all. All told, there was no shortage in flaws in the early years of Scottish education practices. In spite of this, the Kirk’s late sixteenth-and early seventeenth-century attempts at ensuring that all Scots received an education did have a major impact on the country’s legislative actions, not least of which was the 1633 education law. The collaborative effort between Church and State, as

¹⁴ A popular example of this misogyny can be seen in the witch hunt fanaticism that had taken over much of Europe in the Early Modern period and was particularly brutal in Scotland.

¹⁵ Scottish philosopher Adam Smith in Houston and Whyte, eds., “Women in the Economy and Society of Scotland, 1500-1800,” 135.

tumultuous as it was at times, made the eventual success of the public-school system in Scotland and the renowned education of its people possible.

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Appendix

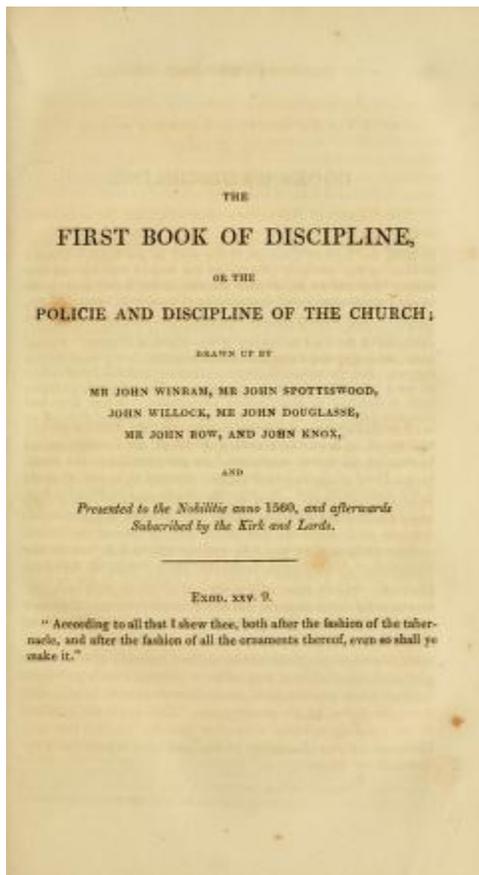
Appendix A

Act V**Ratification of the act of council regarding plantation of schools**

Our sovereign lord, with the advice of the estates, ratifies the act of secret council dated at Edinburgh, 10 December 1616, made regarding the planting of schools, with this addition: that the bishops in their several visitations shall have power, with consent of the heritors and most part of the parishioners, and if the heritor, being lawfully warned, refuses to appear, then with consent of the most part of the parishioners, to set down and stent upon every plough or husband land according to the worth for maintenance and establishing of the said schools. And if any person shall find himself grieved, it shall be lawful to him to have recourse to the lords of secret council for redress of any prejudice he may or does sustain. And ordains letters to be directed for charging of the possessors for the time to answer and obey the schoolmasters of the duties that shall be appointed in manner foresaid.

Transcription of the Education Act of 1633 on the Records of Parliaments of Scotland Website

Appendix B



The First Book of Discipline, c. 1560

Douglasse, John, John Knox, John Row, John Spottiswood, John Willock, and John Winram.
 "The First Book of Discipline." In *The Books of Discipline and of Common Order; The Directory for Family Worship; The Form of Process; And The Order of Election of Superintendents, Ministers, Elders, and Deacons*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1836.

Appendix C

To the Reader.

Now the time drawing neer of the Kings coming to the Crown of England, the watching enemy returns to work again, in another manner then he had done hitherto; which was this: By the mouths of some timorous and worldly men, he causeth to present unto the King the consideration of great difficulties that he was likely to finde, in his succeeding to the Crown of England, by two parties there, who were given out to be the Strength of the Kingdom, to wit, the profest Papists, and the Prelaticall men; therefore, to facilitate the businesse, they must be in some sort contented. For the satisfaction of the Prelates, the King, by degrees, must endeavour to bring again into Scotland Prelacy, with all its dependences; for no neglecter or contemner of the holy Order could be kindly received to reigne in England: and so this part of the advice was followed with all possible care and diligence. To content the Papists, they not onely must have given unto them under-hand hopes of connivence, and over seeing their practice; but also there must be a Letter written to the Pope, to assure his Holinesse of the Kings affection to the Catholike Cause. Thus both these parties were calmed so far, that the King came to the Crown of England, Anno 1602, without manifest opposition, albeit not without the grumbling and grudging of some. As for the stricter sort of Professors of the Reformed Religion, going under the nick-name of Puritans, no opposition or trouble to the Succession was feared from them, because the Principles upon which they go on, rising from the Word of God, are far other then those of worldlings, which flow from interest, and consequently, they needed not Atonement, or Propitiatory Sacrifice, to befriend the King. But the holy Father not finding reall performance by the King of what he looked for, remembers the King in good earnest of his promise not kept, by the Gun-powder Plot, Anno 1605. After which (by Gods mercy failing) men would have thought, that the Popish party should leave off all undertakings hereafter. But they follow their businesse more constantly then so; for no sooner one Plot fails, but incontinent they put another afoot; yea, they have severall Plots at one and the same time in hand, whereof it is likely that either one or other will take. Now this great Plot of the Gun-powder being come to nothing, they, as it were, go back for a time, to come forward in due season with another; and leaving for a while the open and devouring ravishing of the Wolf, they have recourse again to the cunning of the Fox.

The next care then, after the calming in some measure the spirits of men, after so horrid a Treason, is to look about, and to studie by whom the affairs of these Dominions were managed: And finding, by serious inspection, That all affairs received great influence from the Court, after mature deliberation, they resolved to make friends there; which they did, by subtil insinuations, fair words, high promises, and some reall performances of good Offices; yea, when money was absolutely necessary, it was not spared. Thus, by degrees, having gotten friends at Court, in it they make a party next, for whose subsistence and increase, they employ all that they can. Now having power and credit at Court, more and clearly perceivng it to be the fountain from whence all preferment to Honour and benefit in Church and State did flow, they judged it fit for their purpose to make sure of some prime men both in Church and State, according to their minde: which was done as they desired. Thus having gained men chief in State and Church for their use, then they went to the corrupting of the Universities, being the Seminaries of all Liberrall Education. This likewise they did effectuate; first, by the Over-seers connivence to loosensse of life in young people; next, by the bad example of the Seniors

To the Reader.

the Juniors were invited to do mischief. Then the Teachers, by their bad instruction, did corrupt, namely, in Theologie, all sound Doctrine. And for this purpose, the earnest studie of the Old Testament in the Originall Hebrew was cryed downe, as becomming rather men of the Synagogus, then those of the Christian Schools. Likewise the Greek of the New Testament must not be read with diligence, for fear of spoiling the elegancy of the Greek Language, which is to be found in profane Authors. So they withdrew the Students from the studie of Scriptures in the Originall, and recommended to them the reading of humane Writings, particularly in Theologie, the Books of the Ancients, which are commonly called Fathers. Likewise was recommended unto young men the studie of the Sophistry of the Manks, as of Thomas and Scotus namely, with their Expositors. True it is, That if young men were well instructed in Theologie from the Scriptures, and taught the true Principles of Philosophie, in a settled course, by some judicious and diligent Professor, they might reade all these Books, and others in their kinde, with pleasure and benefit. But alas, young men not knowing the rudiments of Theologie, nor the first Elements of Philosophie, are let loose unto themselves, and so by reading these Books, having no sure ground to stick to, learn onely to doubt, and put Queries, yea, of the very Principles of all sound knowledze, both Divine and Humane. Thus being brought to waver and doubt, they are easily led, what by interest, what by weaknesse, to embrace a bad Opinion, or at least, to hold all uncertain, as the ancient Scepticks, not being able to resolve: Yea, doubting is come to that height, that, in the opinion of many, he is the bravest fellow, and wittiest, that can raise most Queries, answer them who will or can: And so Wit is hugely cryed up, which is but meer froth; and poor solid Wisdom is not so much as named, or thought on.

Then those of the richer sort, having spent some time idly and loosely at the Universities, go beyond Sea, particularly to Italy, forsooth, either upon their own trust, or which is little better, if not worse, many of these who go along with young men, to advise and direct them, have as much need of one for their guide, as the young men themselves; having neither steadnesse, discretion, nor probity. So that if there were a just account cast up of all those who either have been bred in the Universities, or gone beyond Sea these many yeers, I will speak within compasse, That of twenty you shall hardly finde one who is improved in vertue by this Breeding, for the good of the Church and State, whereof they are members, and perhaps considerable too, if they were wise and good. At this present both Church and State findes this to be true, by wooll experience, namely, in the Clergie, Gentry, and Nobility.

Now these evils have not been in England alone, for Scotland, according to its proportion, in compasse of Bounds, numbers of people, provision of means, and in its distance from Court, hath its full share of all the evil: For first, the Schools of breeding young people at home were become very corrupt; and many in their travelling abroad, have either miscarried, or little benefited themselves: The fruit we have found, namely, in our corrupt Clergie, yea, and in some of our infatuated Gentry and Nobility: but blessed be God, things are now in a better posture and constitution there, then they have been formerly; God grant we may have occasion to say the like of England. For Religion, sound knowledge, and true wisdom, with probity have been so neglected and contemned there, to the ignominy and reproach of Christianity, that in these times, there we have seen the dolefull effects of want of Religion, and of these other vertues. But to return to the Court.

The

John Knox on corruption of Church, State, and education in *The Historie of the Reformation of the Church of Scotland; Containing Five Books: Together With Some Treatises Conducing To The History*, published 1644