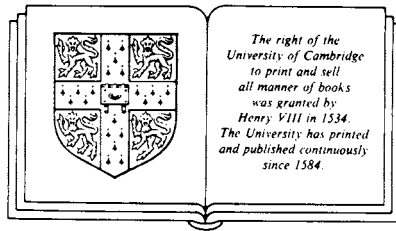


Scottish Literacy and the Scottish Identity

*Illiteracy and Society in Scotland
and Northern England
1600–1800*

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The ideal of Scottish literacy

Two decades ago the study of education and literacy suffered from a set of assumptions about social history as a whole. The story of kings and queens, parliaments and churches, diplomacy and warfare were seen as the only important subjects for scholarly work. The lives of the mass of the population in the past were largely obscure. They were a topic to be treated anecdotally as a necessary but fundamentally unimportant backdrop to more academically respectable subjects. Except for the great R. H. Tawney, the Hammonds and some first-rate work by women historians such as Alice Clark and Mildred Campbell, social history was dominated by Trevelyan and by a style of analysis which concentrated on the upper classes, atypical individuals or curiosities. Of the characteristic patterns of everyday life little had been revealed.

One of the most significant historical developments of the 1960s and 1970s has been the breakthrough in our understanding of the lives of ordinary people in the past. We now know much more about the texture of their experiences. We have glimpses of relations between husbands and wives, parents and children; we understand the complexity of kinship relations and the way economic and demographic forces interacted; conflict and co-operation, power and authority in village communities have provided a fascinating focus for research. The mental world and cultural horizons of men and women dead for centuries are no longer a complete mystery.

The analysis of education and literacy offers a paradigm of these developments. In 1965 Peter Laslett affirmed: 'The discovery of how great a proportion of the population could read and write at any point in time is one of the most urgent of the tasks which face the historian of social structure.'¹ We now have a great deal of statistical information on

¹ P. Laslett, *The world we have lost* (1971): 207.

who among the population of sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and colonial North America could sign their names on a document. This period saw the beginnings of a transition from restricted to mass literacy, but many of the structures of literacy remained the same. Men were more literate on average than women, towns had lower illiteracy than rural areas and there were clear differences between different social classes. We know how these structures fit into the framework of society as a whole. There were significant differences between regions of Europe in literacy achievements, and nowhere in the early modern period was the progress of literacy other than hesitant and irregular. People's reading tastes are much clearer than before and the ways in which they used literacy are better understood. Vigorous historical debates exist on the importance of printing, the relationship between spoken and written forms and the importance of schooling to literacy. Indeed debates from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about who should learn literacy, how and what they should be taught and the likely outcome for individual and society, have all been pushed back into earlier periods.

In Britain the first great national political debates on literacy took place at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the last years of the eighteenth and early years of the nineteenth centuries, observers of British society were acutely aware that illiteracy was a common and probably undesirable phenomenon. They also recognized that it was far from evenly distributed around the country. By the middle of the nineteenth century, educational surveys and the reports of the Registrars-General had made it clear that much of Lowland Scotland and the northern counties of England enjoyed levels of literacy higher than any comparably sized area elsewhere in the British Isles, and furthermore higher than their state of economic and social development might suggest. The proportion of children of school age who were being educated in the northern counties of England equalled that in Scotland and was actually greater in the case of Westmorland.² By contrast, Wales and Monmouthshire, along with the agriculturally precocious southern and eastern counties, were remarkably illiterate.

The same contrast was true of industrial areas. For example, in 1833 a report on Scottish mill workers showed that 96% could read and 53% could write compared with 86% and 43% respectively among a comparable group in England.³ Materials were at hand for contemporaries to make more wide-ranging comparisons of literacy in the form of signatures of brides and grooms on the marriage register,

² J. Sinclair, *Analysis of the statistical account of Scotland* (1826): 79–80.

³ T. C. Smout, *A history of the Scottish people* (1972): 42–3.

statistical summaries of which were published for each registration district from 1838 in England and 1855 in Scotland. Some 90% of Scottish men and women could sign the marriage registration document in 1870 compared to roughly 80% of English people.⁴ Scotland certainly had a slight lead at this time. The distinct regional zoning of illiteracy in mid nineteenth-century Britain can be seen from the proportions of brides and grooms unable to sign their names in full as presented in the reports of the Registrars-General of Scotland, and England and Wales for 1855.

While less marked than in Continental countries such as Germany, France or Italy, this zoning was not a new discovery. Middle- and upper-class observers were however convinced that the deleterious impact of urbanization and industrialization on the 'morals' of the nation was unprecedented and warranted firm action. Industrial areas of the north of England in particular were believed to be peopled by ill-educated, godless and wretched human beings, torn from their closely supervised rural world. These commentators were not slow to draw conclusions from the example of Scotland. In a letter to J. C. Colquhoun MP, The Revd Richard Burgess paraphrased the Member's recommendation for a 'free', universal system of popular education to be set up in England on what was supposed to be the Scottish model, since "'its results have been the elevation of the people from the lowest to the highest point of civilization, from disorder to comfort, from barbarous ignorance to intelligence'". And all this is a matter of history which cannot be denied.⁵ Education was to be an antidote to the detrimental influence of economic change. It was one element of the fondly held bourgeois belief that mankind could be perfected through institutions. Great faith was placed in the value of education. Observers cast around for examples of proven success in other countries as a justification for change in England and for a model of how that change should be brought about. They did not have far to seek. The tradition of universal and effective education in the rural lowlands of Scotland was the focus of envy and admiration in England, especially among those convinced of the need for state intervention in schooling. Compared to Scotland and the other Protestant countries of Europe, education in England was felt to lag behind, dragging with it 'lower orders . . . more ignorant and less

⁴ *18th annual report of the Registrar-General of births, deaths, and marriages in England [1855] (1857); Reports from commissioners vol. 18. First detailed annual report of the Registrar-General of births, deaths, and marriages in Scotland (1861); E. G. West, 'Resource allocation and growth' (1973): 64-5.*

⁵ R. Burgess, *A letter addressed to J. C. Colquhoun esq., M.P.* (1838): 3.

civilized'.⁶ Even Switzerland in the early nineteenth century might have had better educational provision per capita.⁷

Nor was belief in the superiority of Scottish literacy and education confined to the early nineteenth century. As early as the 1700s Daniel Defoe lamented of England 'how full of Ignorance are the dark Villages in our Land of Light?'⁸ It was accepted, though not without question, that Scotland had enjoyed a substantially superior progress in education and literacy when compared to England. According to Sir John Sinclair, who wrote at the start of the nineteenth century, 'in former times, the commons of Scotland were considered to be the most enlightened people of that rank in Europe'.⁹ However, by the nineteenth century even this performance had been called into question. In the face of the unprecedented social problems created by an increase in population, notably in the towns, and by the spread of industrial employments, it was conventional wisdom that Scottish education and literacy declined from their previously excellent standards. In his 1826 *Analysis of the statistical account of Scotland*, Sinclair allowed that 'Scotland is not now so superior to other countries in regard to extent of education, as is generally supposed. It probably was the case about a century ago.'¹⁰ In the 1830s Scotland seemed to some observers 'a half-educated nation', its valuable educational heritage threatened by lack of proper resources.¹¹ During the eighteenth century however a state-instituted national education system had apparently produced a palpably better-educated country than England. Education and literacy were also seen as having a wider social dissemination among the Scottish population. How was this to be explained?

One advocate claimed in 1840 that it was the statutory provision of parochial education in Scotland that had produced 'the industry, enterprize, and foresight of our Scottish fellow-subjects, and above all, their household virtues and earnest patriotism . . . in their domestic piety and reverence for the public institutions and ceremonial of religion'.¹² It was assumed that the exhortations of John Knox and the Calvinists at the Reformation had combined with a variety of state legislation to ensure educational provision on a generous scale during the seventeenth century, and to produce by 1700 what one eminent authority has termed 'the most enlightened peasantry in the world'.¹³

⁶ *Recent measures for the promotion of education in England* (1840): 32; *Substance of the Marquess of Lansdowne's speech* (1839): 11.

⁷ Sinclair (1826): 79–86.

⁸ D. Defoe, *A Review of the state of the British nation* (1708): 318.

⁹ Sinclair (1826): 83. ¹⁰ *Ibid.* 80.

¹¹ G. Lewis, *Scotland a half-educated nation* (1834).

¹² *Recent measures* (1840): 20. ¹³ G. Clark, *The seventeenth century* (1972): 305.

Many aspects of this picture of Scottish education were drawn from the statements of intent set out by the Calvinists in the mid sixteenth century. Their manifesto, the *Book of discipline*, advocated that since

God hath determined that His Church here on earth shall be taught not by angels but by men; and seeing that men are born ignorant of all godliness; and seeing, also, how God ceaseth to illuminate men miraculously . . . it is necessary that your honours [the secular magistrates] be most careful for the virtuous education and godly upbringing of the youth of this realm.¹⁴

The Protestant aspiration that all should have access to the Word of God for themselves was to be accomplished by a system of universal education – a schoolmaster in every parish backed up by a legally enforceable assessment of the landowners to pay for him which would provide basic literacy for rich and poor alike. The wish for greater educational provision was common to all religious reformers of the sixteenth century, but only in Scotland was the church able to recruit the aid of the state in implementing legislation to realize this aim. Acts of the Scottish Parliament were passed in 1616, 1633, 1646, 1696 and 1803 to implement this aim. This was of course quite different from the English system which, until the late nineteenth century, relied on philanthropic endowment, public charities and private fee-paying schools. Apart from intermittent ecclesiastical exhortations to the parish clergy ‘to teache the children . . . to reade and write’ there was no English equivalent of the Calvinist church’s national campaign backed up by secular authority.¹⁵

National education systems were only slowly implemented outside Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of other European countries, Poland did not have a National Education Commission until 1773 and in England state provision was strictly limited until the 1870s. There were attempts to institutionalize the provision of education throughout Europe at various times in the early modern period, but these enjoyed only limited success.¹⁶ Scotland’s early tradition of state legislation on educational provision was seen as the key to her success in literacy, despite the fact that the constant reiteration of acts during the seventeenth century suggests their limited effectiveness. Education was not compulsory in any case even after 1696 –

¹⁴ J. Knox, *The history of the Reformation in Scotland* (1905): 382.

¹⁵ *Injunctions and other ecclesiastical proceedings of Richard Barnes, bishop of Durham* (1850): 19; J. Scotland, *The history of Scottish education* (1969); R. O’Day, *Education and society 1500–1800* (1982).

¹⁶ S. Litak, ‘The parochial school network in Poland’ (1973): 46; R. Chartier, D. Julia and M. Compère, *Education en France du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle* (1976): 27 (hereafter Chartier); M. Roberts, *Gustavus Adolphus* (1953): 437; B. Vogler, ‘La politique scolaire entre Rhin et Moselle’ (1976): 351–2.

though the kirk often exhorted parents to send their children to school – and in nearly all cases it was certainly not free. Compulsion did not come until 1872, ‘free’ schooling until 1891. It is well known that the parochial system was supplemented by a large number of private, fee-paying schools similar to those found in many European countries. Still, the belief remained among an important section of opinion that the Scottish ‘national’ system, where heritors (landowners) were forced to pay most of the cost of education, was bound to be superior to the English ‘voluntary’ one where local demand and charity were the main means of creating educational provision.

Some of the claims made for the Scottish educational system were far from modest. Sir John Sinclair believed: ‘education is so cheap, and the people are so impressed with a sense of its importance, that in almost all the lowland parishes, the younger part of the population, *without a single exception*, are taught to read English, and instructed in the principles of religion’. ‘However humble their condition, the peasantry, in the southern districts, can all read, and are generally more or less skilled in writing and arithmetic.’¹⁷ When in the 1740s Tobias Smollett created the character of Roderick Random, he made him a Scotsman, since ‘I could at a small expence bestow on him such an education as I thought the dignity of his birth and character required, which could not possibly be obtained in England.’ He has Random at one point explaining to a bemused lady how ‘it was not to be wondered at if I had a tolerable education, because learning was so cheap in my country, that every peasant was a scholar’.¹⁸ As early as 1708 Daniel Defoe compared the ignorance of much of the English population with their Scottish counterparts who reaped the benefits of statutory provision of schools and teachers in every parish ‘by which means the poorest People have their Children taught and instructed’.¹⁹ The Report of the Education Commission (Scotland) of 1868 repeated the claim that the Scottish educational system was ‘thoroughly appreciated’ by the middle class, and ‘sedulously employed . . . both for itself and for the class whose labour it uses; and here is their superiority to the English; and the reason of the success of Scotch skilled labourers and Scotsmen of business everywhere’.²⁰ In this fashion beliefs about the workings of the Scottish educational system were used as arguments and examples to justify action in other countries.

¹⁷ Sinclair (1826): 89, 99.

¹⁸ T. Smollett, *The adventures of Roderick Random* (1748): xxxv, 224.

¹⁹ Defoe (1708): 318.

²⁰ Quoted in J. Gray, A. F. McPherson and D. Raffe (eds.), *Reconstructions of secondary education* (1983): 41; hereafter Gray.

Defoe's remark points us towards another aspect of the legendary Scottish educational system: the idea that it was unusually accessible to high- and low-born alike. Lord Brougham spoke of his wish that able members of the lower orders should compete directly with their social superiors for jobs.²¹ Carried out in the light of a vague moral obligation to recognize ability 'which providence has scattered so profusely and so impartially among every rank of men', this was part of the continued struggle by elements of the Scottish intelligensia 'at least for the ideal that education, consisting at the minimum of reading, writing and arithmetic, ought to be for all'.²² Scotland might be economically backward, but by striving for this goal it gained moral kudos and intellectual standing. Sir John Sinclair opined that wherever 'teachers are liberally educated, and capable of instructing youth in the important branches of education, persons of the lowest birth rise to rank and eminence'.²³ Of course, as the Kirk Session of Crail in Fife noted during the 1790s, 'the people in general are not able to afford a liberal education'.²⁴ Without searching too closely for evidence of this aspiration being put into practice, the Scots have developed a sentimental notion of 'lads o' pairts' – poor but gifted boys able to pursue upwards social mobility through education. This notion forms an important part of their national self-image.²⁵ Education was available to all social classes and could promote social mobility. There were of course the well-publicized examples of lower-class boys like Carlyle who made good through education. This does not mean that there was equality of educational attainments between social classes, but that there were no obstacles to education 'which unfairly discriminated against children of particular backgrounds'.²⁶ Poor but gifted boys would not be prevented from bettering themselves by the lack of an education.

The belief that the educational system was performing its intended function has meant that no real examination of its actual workings has been undertaken. Historians have in fact adopted two distinct general attitudes to these sorts of nationalist assertion, and 'judgements have swung violently from extremes of praise to equally uncritical condemnation'.²⁷ A recent and highly influential version of the 'optimistic'

²¹ C. F. Kaestle, 'Elite attitudes towards mass schooling in early industrial England and America' (1976): 181.

²² *Moral statistics of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (1826): 34; Smout (1972): 442.

²³ Sinclair (1826): 83.

²⁴ J. M. Beale, 'A history of the burgh and parochial schools of Fife' (1953): 333–4.

²⁵ Scotland (1969): 68–9.

²⁶ Gray (1983): 198; R. D. Anderson, *Education and opportunity in Victorian Scotland* (1983): 6–8.

²⁷ W. Ferguson, *Scotland 1689 to the present* (1968): 198.

approach is Lawrence Stone's classic article of 1969. Stone sees the creation of a system of free, compulsory, state-supported schools as the reason for Scotland's superior mid nineteenth-century literacy, and for what he believes was the 'dramatically different' evolution of literacy in the two countries from the late seventeenth century onwards.²⁸ Scotland in the mid and late eighteenth century was 'one of the best educated countries in Europe', with education on a far larger scale at all levels and far greater social mobility, the system 'catering for an unusually wide range of social classes'.²⁹ Many historians have followed Stone's assessment and have thus contributed to the legend of Scottish literacy. For Kenneth Lockridge, New England, Scotland and Sweden 'stood out among the western nations of the early modern era for the rapidity, breadth and peak of their rise in literacy'.³⁰ Only New England, parts of northern Germany and perhaps Scotland had attained nearly universal male literacy by the end of the eighteenth century. Scotland in this scenario was truly a star performer in the early modern period.

A more cautious assessment is provided by Christopher Smout, who addresses more directly the question of whether the system collapsed in the early nineteenth century as Webb believed, or whether in fact it had never actually attained the standards of comprehensiveness claimed for it.³¹ Smout suggests that in the Lowlands the parochial schools and the adventure schools were able to create a rural society in which almost everyone seems to have been able to read and write by the mid eighteenth century. Over the period 1780–1830, however, educational provision deteriorated with the redistribution of population to urban and industrial areas, and along with it levels of literacy fell.³² In other words, the 'universal literacy' of the Scottish Lowlanders lasted less than a century, though they retained high levels in many areas into the early nineteenth century. However, the superiority of Scotland's literacy in the second half of the seventeenth century and most of the eighteenth is still implicitly accepted. Even recent critical studies of the role of literacy in social and economic development have accepted this general scenario.³³ Only the very latest work is balanced enough to point out that there was a steady build up of legislation over the seventeenth century, but no uniform and regular process of advancement in either education or literacy.

²⁸ L. Stone, 'Literacy and education in England 1640–1900' (1969): 126–9.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 135.

³⁰ K. A. Lockridge, 'Literacy in early America 1650–1800' (1981): 188.

³¹ Smout (1972): 421–50. ³² *Ibid.* 427, 442–3, 450.

³³ H. J. Graff, *The literacy myth* (1979): 229.

Indeed, a formidable range of unsubstantiated claims have emerged associated with the explanatory and celebratory myth of Scottish literacy; they are neatly rehearsed by L. J. Saunders in his influential study *Scottish democracy*, published in 1950. It was 'widely admitted that there should be a range of educational opportunity and a right of passage for the 'lad o' pairts' who had no initial advantage beyond his own ability, industry and energy'. Accepting uncritically the idea that anyone however poor could benefit from educational provision, Saunders goes on to portray the 'parish school as an equalizing agency in so far as it was a common school designed for education of children of all classes'. As an end in itself, education

helped to define the worth and duty of the individual in terms that were relatively independent of class and circumstance. The average parish school gave the oncoming generation an early experience of a simplified world in which there were few artificial distinctions; it inculcated some universal standards of self-respect and an appreciation of intellectual and moral effort. The result was to create a community of values that made for an easily recognizable national character and outlook.³⁴

The essence of the 'democratic' tradition in education was a stress on equality of opportunity plus the selection of gifted individuals for upwards social mobility through education. Other implications are said to follow. Because the children of all social classes *might* sit together in the schoolroom, it is assumed that class distinctions were diminished, a key feature of Scottish 'democracy'.³⁵ As we will see below this is no more than an assumption. It has, however, fed into a variety of historiographical traditions, one of which is to be found in the debate on the origins of the Scottish Enlightenment, an unexpected phenomenon in such a backward country. Thus Clive argues that the 'national system of education, though in practice never quite as ideal as in conception, enabled many a poor father's boy to go on to one of the universities as well prepared as his socially superior classmates'.³⁶ In the burghs of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scotland 'sic as are pair shall be furnished upone the comone expenses'.³⁷

The argument is that Scotland's unique educational system was a powerful influence in making her society not only different from but better than that of England. Yet even in the southern kingdom one historian speaks with more enthusiasm than judgement of greater social mobility through education in the eighteenth century than in the

³⁴ L. J. Saunders, *Scottish democracy 1815–1840* (1950): 242–3.

³⁵ Scotland (1969): 80–1.

³⁶ J. Clive, 'The social background of the Scottish Renaissance' (1970): 225.

³⁷ Beale (1953): 17.

nineteenth, with 'thousands of craftsmen and farmers sending their sons to Universities . . . the sons of agricultural labourers climbing to the top of the social ladder'.³⁸ Stories of social mobility through education were common in English Sunday schools at the end of the eighteenth century and can also be found in seventeenth-century chapbooks.³⁹ These sorts of story also form part of the self-image of the Scots, for to be Scottish is

to set less store by differences of rank in one's behaviour towards, and judgements of, other individuals. To the extent that one does differentiate, it is to do so on the basis of merit; that is, on the basis of the extent to which universal human qualities are realised in a person's behaviour.⁴⁰

Approaches to the history of Scottish education and literacy offer an excellent example of the impact of this ethos on popular as well as academic thinking.

A less tangible but very real legacy was then the special understanding surrounding the educational system. George Lewis lamented the loss of Scotland's identity in his influential 1834 treatise *Scotland a half-educated nation*.

In all but our parochial churches and parochial schools, we have lost our nationality. In these alone we survive as a nation – stand apart from and superior to England. . . . These are the only institutions around which linger Scottish feelings and attachments: in the support, extension and improvement of which may yet be rallied all the patriotism and piety of Scotland.⁴¹

Views about the distinctive nature and particular importance of Scottish education continue to influence national consciousness and attitudes towards educational change. The Scots persist in seeing the purposes, workings and achievement of their educational world in the light of an historical understanding of past experience which may or may not bear any resemblance to reality.

Scots have, over the centuries, attached a particular importance to the generous public provision of educational opportunity, and they have, on occasion, framed and revised policies and practice in the light of a certain historical understanding of the place of public educational provision in the life of the nation.⁴²

Thus 'the present is explained as the realization of an inheritance that is made potent for the future through the public consent it commands'.⁴³ In the twentieth century accessibility to education is judged by reference to the tradition laid down by John Knox and the Reformers at the

³⁸ N. Hans, *New trends in education in the eighteenth century* (1951): 210.

³⁹ T. W. Laqueur, *Religion and respectability* (1976c): 193–4. M. Spufford, *Small books and pleasant histories* (1981).

⁴⁰ Gray (1983): 39.

⁴¹ Lewis (1834): 75.

⁴² Gray (1983): 38.

⁴³ A. McPherson, 'An angle on the geist' (1983): 219.

time of the Scottish Reformation, to principles associated with the ideal of individual social mobility, and to the expedient motive of general economic prosperity. Scottish literacy is legendary. It has reached the status of a myth, a story which people tell about themselves 'first, to explain the world and, second, to celebrate identity and to express values'.⁴⁴ Literacy itself was an emotive topic, but when linked with politics it became still more potent, both as a source for conflict and as a focus of identity.

It is by no means unusual for education and literacy to be at the centre of a political debate: witness the disputes between republicans and conservative churchmen in nineteenth-century France or the arguments about the role of the Lutheran church in education in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Sweden. In Scotland, however, debate has taken the form of axe-grinding rather than objective investigation of the impact of education on literacy. As Geoffrey Elton once pointed out, Scottish historians hold their history very dear but do not study it too closely in case the results of their enquiries interfere too much with their preconceptions.⁴⁵ Scottish education and literacy are too often studied as a way of asserting Scotland's special identity and celebrating her particular values rather than as a means of discovering what Scotland's educational history really was.

Because of Scotland's long nationalist tradition, it is easy to promote controversy about literature, society and culture, but difficult to induce constructive debate. There are numerous accounts of schools and educational legislation but few attempts have been made to analyse the image of Scottish literacy in its social context. Scholars have produced a large amount of painstaking research into actual events and influences, but when it comes to explaining the events and fitting them into a theoretical framework historians have too easily resorted to the simplest notions and to apparently commonsense logic or simplistic pseudo-psychology. Indeed, the perceptive reader will not be slow to notice that most of the above remarks about literacy are almost purely conjectural. They are implicitly quantitative but offer almost no information on actual levels of literacy.

Even the most basic statistics on Scottish literacy attainments for any period before the nineteenth century are lacking. Anecdotes and snippets of suggestive information are virtually all that can be found.⁴⁶ In 1521 John Major opined that 'the gentry educate their children neither

⁴⁴ Gray (1983): 39.

⁴⁵ B. P. Lenman, 'Reinterpreting Scotland's last two centuries of independence' (1982): 217.

⁴⁶ O'Day (1982): 229.