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John Kerr

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

SCHOOLS BEFORE 1560

THERE is not so far as I have seen any exact record of education in Scotland earlier than the 12th century. It is however not only a fair but a necessary inference, that there must have been schools of some kind, probably only those in connection with monasteries, from the time of the settlement of Columba in Iona in 563. The service of the Church, which was conducted in Latin, must have required that the boys and youths who took part in the service, or who were being trained as clerics, got more or less instruction in that language. The absence of books also required that they should be taught writing with a view to copying the Scriptures and religious books.

We are on perfectly safe ground in stating that between 1183 and 1248 grants of lands, houses, chapels, tithes, and schools were made or confirmed to different parts of the country by no fewer than six Popes, ranging from Lucius to Innocent IV, all for the promotion of education.

The fostering of education was not left to the Popes alone. In the Chamberlain and Exchequer rolls we find abundant evidence of the interest shown by the Scottish kings during the whole of the 14th century. Grant after grant is recorded as being paid by the King's Treasurer and Chamberlain to meet the expense of food and clothing for certain poor scholars. It is fair to infer from this, that the schools attended by these poor scholars were doing good work. It may be presumed that they were chosen for this royal favour because of their industry and ability. Selection would have been impossible, had the teacher been half-hearted or the pupil indolent.

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That the teaching, though probably solid and faithful, was not highly advanced is shown by the fact that those who aimed at the higher reaches of education were obliged to seek it in the oldest of the Oxford Colleges—University, Merton and Balliol—or abroad in France, Switzerland, Germany and Italy, for Scotland at that time had no great schools of her own. Many did so with the help of grants from our sovereigns, and returned to be masters of schools in their native land. The absence of schools in Scotland in which a liberal education could be completed, the inconvenience of foreign travel for this purpose, and the rapidly growing desire for advanced education led to the foundation of the three earliest Scottish universities, St Andrews in 1411, Glasgow in 1450, and Aberdeen in 1494.

Before the Reformation there were schools in most of the chief towns, but, north of Aberdeen, only in Elgin and Kirkwall which were cathedral towns. In the third report of the Schools Commission¹, dated December 1867, we are told that “schools for Latin, to which were subsequently added ‘Lecture’ schools for English, existed in the chief towns of Scotland from a very early period.” We have authentic notice of a school in Aberdeen in 1124. The schools of Perth and Stirling were in existence in 1173, and charters quoted in Chalmers’ *Caledonia* mention other schools, both in the twelfth and the subsequent century. It would serve no good purpose to enumerate them all, but we may specify St Andrews whose school was under the charge of a rector in 1233; Aberdeen and Ayr² of which we have notices in 1262 and 1264; Montrose, which had the honour of receiving a small endowment from Robert the Bruce in 1329³, and speaking generally it may be said that all the chief towns, and many that have since sunk into obscurity, had schools, such as they were, before the beginning of the 16th century. The statute of the Scottish Parliament in the reign of James IV (1496) which ordains that “barons and freeholders who were of

¹ Vol. 1, pp. 1, 2.

² Ayr also is mentioned as having a school in 1233.

³ The amount contributed was only 20 shillings and scarcely attains to the dignity of an endowment. But it may be added that in the time of Elizabeth £8 was considered sufficient to endow a Hebrew Lecturer or a Fellowship in Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

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PRAE-REFORMATION SCHOOLS

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substance should put their eldest sons or heirs to the schools from their being eight or nine years of age, and to remain at the grammar schools till they be competently founded and have perfect Latin” is conclusive and satisfactory proof on this point¹. It is satisfactory proof that an act was passed for compulsory education at grammar schools of the *eldest* sons or heirs of barons and men of substance, but only for them. The act makes no provision for girls or the children of people on a lower level than men of substance. This appears in the further provision, viz. that they must remain three years at the schools of art and ‘jure’ so as to have knowledge of the laws, and that justice may reign universally throughout the realm, and that sheriffs and judges may have knowledge to do justice, so that the poor people should have no need to apply to the King’s principal auditors for every small injury². Defaulters in respect of this act were liable to a penalty of twenty pounds. There is no evidence of the enforcement of the penalty. It is clear that the statute, striking proof as it is of the King’s wisdom and foresight, and such as has no parallel in any other country at this early period, while beneficently providing for the *convenience* of the poorer people, left their *education* untouched.

These schools were under the direction of the Church, and were closely connected with the cathedrals, monasteries and other religious establishments of the country. Thus the monks of Dunfermline were directors of the schools of Perth and Stirling³; Ayr School was connected with the Church of John the Baptist⁴; the monks of Kelso were directors of the schools in the county of Roxburgh. Our first authentic notice of the schools of Dundee is a document in the register of the See of Brechin in 1434. In that year, a

¹ Acts of Scottish Parliament, 1496, c. 3, II, 238.

² It is to be noted that all sheriffships were at this time hereditary. The Cheynes of Ravenscraig near Peterhead were sheriffs of Banffshire, and, in order to have power of pit and gallows over their tenants, got the parish of St Fergus and their estate of Fetterangus declared to be part of Banffshire as it still remains marked in the map. Such an education as that described was very necessary for a *hereditary* sheriff.

³ *Registrum de Dunfermlyn*, no. 93, p. 56.

⁴ *Burgh Records of Ayr*.

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priest ventured to teach without the authority of the Chancellor, and was in consequence summoned before the Bishop, and after duly acknowledging his offence was deprived of his office. The burgh of Edinburgh provided a school-house, and paid a salary to its teacher at least as early as 1500, but the High School itself was dependent on the Abbey of Holyrood¹.

“The Glasgow Grammar School, which existed early in the 14th century, was dependent on the cathedral church, and the Chancellor of the diocese had the appointment of masters and superintendence of education in the city². An offending priest in 1494, who had presumed to teach grammar and other branches without due authority from the Chancellor, was summoned before the Bishop, and ordered to desist. In Aberdeen the early usage was as follows: The Town Council presented the master to his office, subject to the approval of the Chancellor of the Bishop who instituted the presentee. We find frequent notices of this from 1418 downwards. The terms of the appointment of rector in that year are in substance as follows: ‘The Chancellor of the Church of Aberdeen to all the faithful, greeting: Inasmuch as the institution to the office of school-master belongs to me as Chancellor, and an honest, prudent and discreet man has been presented to me by the Provost and Council of the burgh, and on examination has been found duly qualified, I have by letter of collation instituted him in the office for *the whole term of his life*.’ Incidentally the last words (*pro toto tempore suæ vitæ*) are important as showing the tenure of office in those early times in Aberdeen³.”

The attempts of the Church to possess the exclusive patronage of the schools were not always successful. In Brechin in 1485 a dispute on this subject between the Duke of Ross and the Bishop was settled by the Crown in favour of the Duke, and a warning was given that none of the King’s lieges should “take upon hand to make any manner of persecution or following of the said matter at the Court of Rome, since it pertains to lay patronage.”

¹ *Miscellany of Spalding Club*, vol. v, p. 69.

² *Registrum Epis. Glasg.* 1, no. 211, p. 170.

³ *State intervention in Education*. De Montmorency, p. 113.

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1] THE CHURCH AND THE GRAMMAR SCHOOLS 5

There is little definite evidence that a general education apart from those pupils who were being trained for the Church was aimed at during the 12th and 13th centuries. Mr Grant in his history of the burgh schools mentions an incident recorded by Reginald of Durham from which a general and lower education may be inferred. This school was kept in a church on Tweedside “for the benefit of the neighbourhood.” One of the pupils who did not appreciate the benefit, threw the key of the church into a deep pool in the river, hoping to escape “the slavery of learning.” A lad in training for clerical service and under the power of the priests would scarcely have dared to seek this remedy. The same Reginald, speaking of a school kept in the church of Norham, says that “it is now a common practice.” A school “for the benefit of the neighbourhood” could scarcely mean anything else than a school in which others than those being trained for the Church were educated. We find also evidence of laymen’s children, probably only of noble birth, being educated as boarders in the same schools as young ecclesiastics.

In the burgh records of Edinburgh of date 1498 we have what seems tolerably clear evidence of the existence of schools other than those under church management. Owing to the prevalence of the plague the municipal authorities ordained that all schools should ‘scail,’ and that landward children should go home and remain there till God provide remedy. We know that at this time the Grammar School and the Canongate School were in existence, but *all* would probably not have been used, if these were the only schools. What was the character of these other schools is not shown, but they were probably ‘lecture’ and ‘dame’ schools, in which only elementary subjects were taught, and with which, on that account, the magistrates did not think it necessary to interfere. At the time of the Reformation the Grammar School of Perth was the most celebrated in the kingdom, and was attended by the sons of noblemen and gentlemen who were boarded with Mr Row and instructed in Greek and Hebrew¹.

This slight and very general sketch of the extent to which

¹ McCrie's *Life of Knox*, I, p. 294.

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schools were in existence before the Reformation may be appropriately followed by some account of the school authorities on whose action and functions the success of the school mainly depended.

The officials of the schools under church management were Ferleyn, Master, and Scoloc. The Ferleyn was an official of great dignity and importance. Mr Joseph Robertson has, with characteristic thoroughness and accuracy, shown his position with regard to both school and university¹. "What the Chancellor became in the English and Scoto-English churches from about the 12th century, the Ferleiginn seems to have been in the Irish and Scoto-Irish churches of an earlier age." By derivation it is said to mean 'Man of learning.' It was his duty to attend to the transcription of manuscripts, and copying of deeds, and to rule or teach the schools. In at least one instance, the same person was both Archdeacon and Ferleyn, viz. in St Andrews. "He had," says Mr Robertson, "the right of election of the Master of the Schools of the Metropolitan City². He was conservator of the privileges of the university, and to him belonged the office of investiture of all persons presented to benefices within the diocese of St Andrews³. The nomination of the Archdeacon was with the King, and it needs but to consider the list of those who held the office, to see what its dignity and importance must have been, and to be satisfied of the care which was generally taken to choose men of learning for its duties."

The social position of the master or rector of a school, and the high estimation in which the office was held, may be gathered from his being associated with persons of the highest rank in the State, in the Church, and even with the sons of kings, for the settlement of disputes about the ownership of church property. Instances of this are recorded in authentic documents. The rectors of Perth, Ayr, and South Berwick are found associated with high church dignitaries as judges in disputes of this kind. Nor were their functions as prominent citizens confined to questions of church property. They were much in evidence in

¹ *Miscellany of Spalding Club*, v, 72—77.

² Act. Parl. Scot. iv, 517.

³ *Ibid.* 493—4.

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SOCIAL POSITION OF SCHOOLMASTERS

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cases of political importance. Among the guarantors for the payment of the ransom for David II, a prisoner in England, we find the rector of the school of Cupar. In business transactions involving the use of written documents, the rector was doubtless found to be a most valuable person, at a time when writing was almost entirely unknown even to many of the nobility. His importance however was not confined to these very early times. Up to the Reformation he holds a prominent position as a public man. In the 16th century, we find him appointed a deputy for electing the Lord Rector of Glasgow University, and as an examiner of its candidates for graduation. Even the Reformation, which brought about so many other changes, did not affect the social standing of the rector. In 1606 we find that John Ray, and in 1630 Thomas Crawford—both Professors of Humanity in the University of Edinburgh—considered it promotion to vacate their chairs and become rectors of the High School—a remarkable change in the relative dignity of professor and rector. The status of the Scottish rector seems to have been saved from the comparative degradation which fell to the lot of the proctor or rector in Oxford and Cambridge. The humble character of his vocation, and the crude ideas of discipline then prevalent, may be gathered from his being presented, on his appointment to a mastership in the college, with a rod with which he had to make public exhibition of his skill in flagellation¹. “Then shall the Bedell purvay for every master in Gramer a shrewde Boy, whom the master in Gramer shall bete openlye in the Scolys, and the master in Gramer shall give the Boye a Grote for hys Labour, and another Grote to hym that provydeth the Rode and the Palmer etc. *de singulis*. And thus endythe the Acte in that Faculty.” It is evident from this passage that skill in whipping was an important qualification for the office of master. *Shrewde* and *Labour* perhaps require explanation. *Shrewde* formerly meant mischievous or malicious. Hence the purvaying of a boy who, if not at present guilty of any misconduct, was sure to be so sooner or later. *Labour* often occurs in the sense of suffering. A ship, e.g., labours in a storm.

¹ Peacock's *Univ. of Cambridge Observations*, Appendix A, p. xxxvii.

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The boy in question suffers from the rod, and the account is squared by his receiving a groat for his suffering.

Erasmus, speaking of England, says “grammarians of his time are ‘a race of all men the most miserable,’ who grow old at their work surrounded by herds of boys, deafened by continual uproar, and poisoned by a close and foul atmosphere; satisfied however so long as they can overawe the terrified throng by the terrors of their look and speech, and, while they cut them to pieces with ferule, birch, and thong, gratify their own merciless natures at pleasure.” Similarly, in a letter written somewhat later, he tells us what difficulty he encountered when he sought to find at Cambridge a second master for Colet’s newly founded school at St Paul’s, and how a college don, whom he consulted on the subject, sneeringly rejoined—“Who would put up with the life of a schoolmaster who could get his living in any other way¹.”

That this was said by Erasmus early in the 16th century, furnishes a very striking contrast to the social position of the master of the Scottish grammar school of the same period. It is surprising, in view of this description of the grammarian in England, that there seems to have been an adequate supply of candidates for scholastic vacancies.

The relation of the scoloc to the school is not quite so clear. Scolocs are first heard of in 1265, when reference is made to the scoloc lands of Ellon, the old capital of the earldom of Buchan. That scoloc and scholar are identical is evident from contemporary documents. The scoloc, however, was not simply a pupil. He was in some sense an official, a lower grade of churchman, probably of humble origin, a pupil who, by industry and ability, had established a claim to some share in ecclesiastical functions in the absence of the priest, and had acquired a personal interest in the endowment left for his maintenance. The scoloc lands had, in the 14th century, shared the fate of other religious foundations, the greater part being seized by laymen and dealt with by them as an inheritance, the smaller portion by ecclesiastics, who undertook, and, presumably with more or less efficiency, discharged the duties originally contemplated by the endowment. By the middle of the 16th century the designation ‘scoloc lands’

¹ Mullinger, vol. 1, 345.

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had become obsolete. They soon ceased to be closely connected with education, and were held by persons more like Crofters than scholars.

While the records bear that Peebles was the first burgh that took in 1464 the appointment of the master out of the hands of the Church and into its own, it does not appear that education flourished under its superintendence. For eighty years subsequent to 1475, the burgh records are blank in respect of education. Except that the two masters appointed between 1464 and 1475 were churchmen, there is no clear evidence that the schools to which they were appointed were schools for advanced instruction, though they probably were. In 1555, "the bailies are to provide the teacher with a chamber, where it may be got most conveniently, and also with the use of the tolbooth to teach his bairns reading and writing English." It would appear from this, that if the school was a grammar school, it was one to which an elementary or 'lecture' school was attached, a very unusual arrangement. Next year Sir William Tunno¹ was appointed schoolmaster, and the town became bound to "find him an honest chamber at their expense with chimney, closet and necessaries except furnishing²." This arrangement did not last, for in January following another master was appointed to teach the grammar school and to provide a chamber for himself. This is the first occasion on which the designation 'Grammar School' occurs in the Peebles Records.

During the next five or six years the educational condition of Peebles was not satisfactory. There were several changes of teachers, about one of whom there is the following entry, "if he teaches the bairns more diligently, wherethrough they conceive more wisdom nor they did of before, the town to have consideration thereof³." With regard to another, "the Council ordains the master to wait on the bairns and not to go hunting nor other pleasures in time coming, without licence of the aldermen, failing which, he will be deposed⁴." Such entries as these, combined with the fact that there was no building set apart for the school,

¹ Sir presumably means Dominus or B.A.

² *Burgh Records of Peebles.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

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and that change of teachers was frequent, suggest a doubt of the efficiency of the management and the expediency of their dispensing with ecclesiastical interference.

It is interesting to note the varying fortunes of towns at different stages of their history, from both an educational and commercial point of view. Ayr is perhaps one of the most notable in this respect. It was early in the field as having in 1233 an important school now represented by the Ayr Academy. It is therefore much more ancient than any of the Scottish universities and 150 years older than Winchester the oldest of the most famous English public schools. The master was appointed a member of a Papal Commission to settle a dispute between Gilbert of Renfrew and the Abbot of Paisley, about a piece of land to which both laid claim. It was also one of the first to have its school recognised as a burgh school, and, to that extent, freed from ecclesiastical government. Ten years before the Reformation, the Town Council appointed the schoolmaster, though elsewhere, as a rule, magistrates bore the expense, but had no share in the management or appointment of the teacher. For several succeeding centuries, there are unfortunately no records of the success of the school, nor is there any explanation of their disappearance, but it may be safely inferred, from the abundance and character of information about the period subsequent to the Reformation, showing liberality of view, intelligent interest in respect of visitation and examination of schools and appointment of teachers, that attention to the subject was continuous and adequate. The present high position of Ayr Academy is a proof that there is no break in the continuity.

The condition of Ayr from a commercial point of view is widely different. Because of its strong castle and excellent harbour, it was created a royal burgh by William the Lyon in a charter of 1202, which is the oldest of those actually constituting a burgh. Though not strictly relevant to our subject, the quotation of a few extracts from Dr Patrick's *Inquiry into the History of Air Burgh School* is perhaps not out of place. "Ayr made a much more conspicuous figure in Christendom and in Scottish affairs in the 13th century, than it came to do in the 18th. Unlike its school, the burgh did not maintain, still less