The Education (Scotland) Act 1872 and its significance for the Church of Scotland.

John Stevenson  
Retired Church of Scotland Minister, formerly General Secretary of Church of Scotland Education Department.

ABSTRACT
During the 1850’s and 60’s there was increasing discontent regarding the provision of school education as controlled and managed by the Church of Scotland. This led to a number of Parliamentary Bills being brought forward proposing a new national system. The Church opposed these mainly on the grounds that there was no guarantee that Religious Instruction would continue to have a place in the school curriculum. In February 1872 Lord Advocate George Young presented in the Commons an Education Bill ‘To extend and amend the provisions of the law of Scotland on the subject of education’ in order that ‘the means of procuring efficient education … may be furnished and made available to the whole people of Scotland.’ This was passed on 2nd August as The Education (Scotland) Act 1872 and transferred the full control of schools from church to state. The Act included a Preamble allowing for Religious Instruction to be taught according to ‘use and wont’. The removal of its management of school education may be seen as a major blow for the Church of Scotland, removing a historic contribution to national life. In actual fact, the consequence was the revitalising of the Church enabling it to concentrate its energy on strengthening its influence in the community and in outreach to its parishes with a new sense of social mission. Although the Church had lost its direct control of the school curriculum it continued to support Religious Instruction through its Teacher Training, its Sunday schools and its ministerial representation on school boards.

KEYWORDS: school education, school boards, revitalising, social mission

THE SITUATION IN 1872 AND THE CHURCH’S INITIAL RESPONSE
Since the Reformation the Church of Scotland through its parish ministers and courts had been actively involved in Scottish education. The First Book of Discipline had laid down that:

discreet, grave and learned men be appointed to visit Schooles for the trial of their exercise, profite and continuance: To wit, the Minister and Elders and the rest of learned men in every town shall in every quarter make examination how the youth have profited. (Cameron, 1972: 132-133)
The 1696 Act for Settling of Schools made it the responsibility of the heritors in every parish to provide a school and the salary of the master. From that time various Parliamentary and General Assembly Acts had established a statutory right of presbyterial examination of schools and the scrutiny of schoolmasters on their appointment. In 1824, aware of the shortage of schools throughout the country, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland agreed to set up a committee to bring forward a plan for increasing the means of school education in Scotland. The following year the Assembly formally re-appointed this committee as an Education Committee whose remit was to plant schools to supplement parochial schools in areas where additional provision was most needed, particularly in the Highlands and Islands. The Education Committee was also answerable to the General Assembly for the oversight of the Church's statutory management of parochial schools through the supervision of local presbyteries and kirk sessions. By 1872 the Church had established over 280 elementary schools throughout the country and two colleges for training teachers (formerly 'normal schools'). The Church also took credit for managing over 120 Sewing schools and for the education of 2,000 pupils who were attending Sabbath schools instead of week-day schools. In 1866 it reported that over the previous three years it had been able to meet all expenditure on female schools from private subscriptions and it was confidently expected that there would be further funds to expand this work (RSCS, 1866: 14). In 1864 a Royal Commission (the Argyll Commission) was set up to inquire into schooling in Scotland. Arising from its findings various Bills were presented in Parliament with a view to replacing the denominational system with a national system of education. The Church of Scotland, however, was reluctant to hand over its management of schools and with that the responsibility for Religious Instruction.

In response to the Argyll Commission's assertion that the permanence of denominational schools was precarious (Argyll Commission, 1867: xxxviii) the Church pointed out that:

the maintenance of them [the Assembly schools] does not press hard on the funds of the Church of Scotland or of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, both of which are in a position largely to extend their operations, if necessary – the schools on the Educational Scheme of the Established Church have increased 15 per cent since the Commission began its sittings, and its funds are more than sufficient for the work it has to do (ECR, 1867: 14)

By 1867 the funds set aside for education were showing a healthy balance of some £10,000 hence the claim made to the Argyll Commission that the Church

\[1\] The exact number of schools funded one way or another by the Church of Scotland is very difficult to calculate. It may include Assembly schools, SSPCK schools, Sessional and congregational schools, schools founded and endowed by Church members such as Public works and Heritors' schools and Sewing Schools. The numbers quoted in reports and by historians differ according to the categories included. The Reports of Presbyteries on Schools, December 1872, gives 1250 as the number of schools 'which owe their existence to the voluntary exertions of ministers and members of the Church'.

\[2\] The commission, under the chairmanship of the Duke of Argyll, began with fifteen members, with three more being added in December, 1865. Among its number were representatives from both houses of Parliament and members of both the Established Church and the Free Church.
was in a position to extend its operations (ECR, 1867: 31). It is no wonder that the committee felt that ‘it would be a matter of regret if, by the ill-considered provisions of any legislative measure, they should be arrested, in the time of their highest prosperity’ (ECR, 1867: 22).

However, after the Disruption of 1843, criticisms of the provision of education by the Church of Scotland were widespread throughout the country. There began what R. D. Anderson (1995: 165) described as ‘a long process of public intervention’. The move away from the denominational system was gaining strength and change was almost inevitable. The Argyll Commission concluded that:

People of every class and every denomination are agreed that Scotland is fully ripe for a national system. Parents of all denominations send their children indiscriminately to schools belonging to different denominations than their own, knowing well that, in doctrine and system, the religious instruction in schools of one denomination does not differ from that given in schools of another, the Roman Catholic schools alone excepted. There is no reason on religious grounds why there should not be a national system ... (Argyll Commission, 1866: 176)³

In 1869 the Scottish Liberal MP George Young was appointed Lord Advocate and took up the case for Educational Reform in Scotland. In February 1869 he introduced into the House of Lords his Parochial Schools (Scotland) Bill which received a surprising amount of support in the presbyteries and synods of the Church and might have found approval had the continuation of religious instruction in schools been secured. Here, for the first time, we find the proposal that religious instruction should be legislated for according to ‘use and wont’, a phrase which would become significant in the Preamble to the 1872 Act which followed:

The Committee (i.e. the Church of Scotland Education Committee) respectfully urge on the attention of members of Parliament the importance of inserting as a preamble to the conscience clause the words ‘in every New National School religious instruction shall be given in conformity with the use and wont of the Parochial Schools of Scotland’ [my italics] (ECR, 1870: 73)

The Parochial Schools (Scotland) Bill 1869 had eventually to be abandoned by the House of Lords due to lack of Parliamentary time but in February 1871 Young returned to the Commons with a revised version - a Bill:

To extend and amend the provisions of the law of Scotland on the subject of education’ in order that ‘the means of procuring efficient education ... may be furnished and made available to the whole people of Scotland.

³ This is borne out by Table II published in (Argyll Commission, 1867: 24) which clearly showed that many pupils attended schools different from their own denominations.
This provided for a committee of the Privy Council to be called the Scotch (later Scottish) Education Department (SED). Schools were to be called ‘parish schools’ and ‘burgh schools’ and infant and evening schools were to be established. Attendance at school was to be compulsory for all children between five and thirteen years of age. School boards would be elected in each parish and burgh by all owners or occupiers of lands or heritages of the annual value of not less than four pounds. These boards would be responsible for managing schools and appointing teachers, but the power to dismiss teachers lay with the Scotch Education Department whose decision would be final and not reviewable. Schools erected or maintained by voluntary contributions and Churches could transfer into the new system, but this was not made compulsory. In answer to critics it was stated that care should be taken ‘that the standard of education which now exists in parochial schools shall not be lowered’.4 However, no provision was made specifically for Secondary Education, in spite of the fact that what could have been regarded as ‘secondary’ subjects were already being taught widely in many Scottish burgh schools and ‘academies’ set up by the middle classes for their children (ECR, 1871: 22).5 The Education (Scotland) Act 1872 did, however, recognise the existence of these schools which it classed as ‘higher class public schools’ to be managed by the school boards ‘with a view to promote the higher education of the country’).6 No recommendation was made about the place of religious instruction on the curriculum, but it stated that there would be no grant for religious instruction and a conscience clause allowed for the withdrawal of children from instruction in religious subjects and on any day set apart for religious observance.7 In 1871 John Cook Convener of the Church of Scotland Education Committee in a speech to the Commission of Assembly proposed that Clause 75 of the Lord Advocate’s Scotch Education Bill should begin, ‘religious instruction in every public school shall be according to the use and wont of the parochial schools of Scotland except where it has otherwise been determined by a majority of the school board with the consent of the Scotch Education Department’ (Cook & Milne-Home, 1871: 18). At the following Assembly (23rd May, 1871) it was agreed to reject the Bill ‘unless amendments be made securing religious instruction in the schools according to use and wont in Scotland protecting in its main features the present constitution of the parochial schools’ (RSCS, 1871: 50).

Having received notice of two hundred amendments to his bill, Young decided to withdraw it; but by February 1872 he was back with another very similar one which, after some notable amendments, was passed in August 1872 as the Education (Scotland) Act. It was thanks to an amendment to the Act moved by Edward S. Gordon, MP for the Universities of Glasgow and Aberdeen, that the

4 Parliamentary Papers, A Bill To extend and amend the provisions of the law of Scotland on the subject of education Schedule C, lines 17-18.
5 The Education Committee reporting on approximately one thousand parochial schools examined noted that 4,048 scholars were learning Latin, 435 were learning Greek, 2,308 were learning French, 98 were learning German, and 2,550 were studying mathematics.
6 Education (Scotland) Act 1872, Chapter 62, Section 62.
7 Here the term ‘religious observance’ is introduced for the first time. Its inclusion here will be of significance for later legislation, particularly in the 20th century.

Downloaded from Brill.com 11/24/2023 03:12:51PM via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC 4.0 license.
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0
teaching of religious instruction in Scottish schools was secured and Young agreed to insert in the Preamble:

> Whereas it has been the custom in the public schools of Scotland to give instruction in religion to children whose parents did not object to the instruction so given, but with liberty to parents without forfeiting any of the other advantages of the schools, to elect that their children should not receive such instruction, and it is expedient that the managers of public schools shall be at liberty to continue the said custom: Be it therefore enacted...  

Important as this amendment to the Preamble was, it did not in the end achieve what Gordon had wanted. It left the matter still open and did not guarantee that religious instruction would be taught according to the 'use and wont' of Scottish schools. The Act itself laid down that no parliamentary grant would be made towards the provision of religious instruction and the subject would not be examined or inspected by government inspectors. The Act affirmed that parents had the right to withdraw their children from religious instruction and that any such children would not be disadvantaged ‘by reason of the denomination to which such child or his parents belong, or by reason of his being withdrawn from any instruction in religious subjects’.

The Act arranged for the setting up of school boards for each parish and burgh and enacted that the management of existing schools should be transferred to these boards. G. W. T. Omond commented, ‘Young’s solution of the religious difficulty was possible only because there was in Scotland neither that mortal hatred between Church and Chapel which is found in England, nor any difference in the dogmas which were accepted by the various branches of Presbyterianism. Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Roman Catholics sat together on school boards and the religious training of the young continued unchanged in parish schools’ (Omond, 1914: 283). According to D. J. Withrington, the Free Church and the Established Church had been willing to sacrifice their schools in order to safeguard the position of religious instruction:

> The question for the Free and Established Churches had shifted from one of objecting to the possibility that a new state system might be used to support denominationalism to one of ensuring that some religion at least was going to be taught in school (1972: 120)

The 1872 Act did not outlaw denominational schools in so many words and in a Memorandum issued by the Education Committee shortly after the passing of the Act, the Convener, John Cook, argued that the Church found itself in a difficult situation because from the start its schools had never been strictly denominational:

---

8Education (Scotland) Act 1872, Chapter 62, Page 372. ‘whereas it has been the custom’, now usually described as ‘use and wont’. This was actually the Lord Advocate’s wording. Gordon’s original version had included the words, ‘Instruction in the Holy Scriptures in the Public Schools as an essential part of education’. Hansard, Third Series, CCXI, 288. This had been carried in the House on May 6th 1872 by a majority of seven. Hansard CCXI 352.
Many Voluntary Schools are properly called Denominational because ... [they] were founded for the purpose of giving a distinctive religious teaching ... the schools established by the Education Committee, on the other hand, and those founded by Kirk Sessions, landholders, proprietors of Public Works, and others ... were established, not because of any objection taken to the existing system, but because the educational wants of the country were inadequately supplied. (NRS CH1.43.3, 1872 : 1-2)

The Act’s legislation for rate-supported schools throughout the land, however, did make the Church of Scotland's schools more or less superfluous. These schools had originally been established to provide education throughout the country where there was a lack of schooling. Now that education was to be a statutory provision there would be no need for Assembly schools. The Church could not have expected its members to pay for the new schools through the rates and at the same time contribute to the upkeep of Assembly schools. Nevertheless, the Church of Scotland was reluctant to hand over its schools. It disapproved of the fact that school boards would be controlled by the Scottish Education Committee sitting in London and considered that ‘the power and liberty of local school boards are accordingly illusory and the boards would be impotent as regards the number of schools or the instruction given in them’ (RSCS, 1872: 4). The Church feared that the country would suffer from ‘the inevitable degeneracy of its teachers’ and supported ‘the continuance of Parochial Schools and the liberty of denominational teaching as the only permanent security of religious instruction’ (ibid: 5). In the following year it recommended that ‘wherever there was a school in connection with a congregation and supported by it, an effort should be made to retain the school on its present denominational footing’ (RSCS, 1873: 7). The Church continued to believe that the only way to secure Religious Instruction was by holding on to its schools and pointed out that in no case did they take any action which could be considered as ‘hastie’ (RSCS, 1874: 6F). Nevertheless, by 1875 it had reduced the number of Assembly Schools to 116 and by 1878 only 2 Assembly schools remained (RSCS, 1878: 5). By that time the Church’s Education Committee had satisfied itself that by and large Religious Instruction was being taught according to ‘use and wont’, thanks partly to the appointment of Mr. Macquarrie as inspector and also to the awarding of special grants to teachers for excellency in teaching Religious Instruction.

Here it is revealing to refer to a 1943 Memorandum issued by the Scottish Education Department:

The mass of the Scotch people are Presbyterians, and for these the national schools may be said to exist, just as the Roman Catholic and Episcopal schools respectively exist for these denominations. The public schools are to all intents and purposes denominational schools. Public and Presbyterian are practically interchangeable terms.9

---

9 Scottish Education Department Memorandum (Cmd. 6426, Edinburgh: HMSO, 1943), 6.
SCHOOL BOARDS AND RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

The Education (Scotland) Act 1872 provided that parochial and burgh schools (now to be known as ‘public schools’) would be managed by local school boards directly elected by the ratepayers. The Church of Scotland thus lost the direct management of Scottish schools for which it had been responsible more or less since the Reformation. G. W. T. Omond remarked ‘the creation of local boards was not so actively opposed as it had once been for it was clear that if, as most Scotsmen now thought, the members of a congregation were competent to elect a minister, the ratepayers were no less competent to elect a schoolmaster’ (1914: 182). The Preamble had confirmed that religious instruction could be continued in schools as had been the custom. The leading Free Church minister Thomas Guthrie had predicted that whatever the educational system there was no cause for anxiety: ‘can any man in his senses believe that the Bible-reading, Bible-loving people of Scotland will thrust the Word of God out of their schools?’ (Guthrie, 1872: 1-4). John Tulloch, Principal of St Mary’s College and Clerk to the General Assembly, told the 1872 Assembly, ‘I have the most perfect confidence in the local boards:

... it is the worst thing that could be said against the Churches that there should be doubt lest the parents of Scotland, who are members of our Churches, would hesitate as to the religious teaching of their children’ (Oliphant, 1888: 266-7)

And so it proved to be the case, thanks to the composition of the first school boards and the preparation of teachers in the churches' Training Colleges. (The Presbyterian Churches’ teacher training colleges remained under their control until 1907.)

The Preamble had stated that it was expedient that school managers should be at liberty to continue the existing custom whereby religious instruction was given in schools to children whose parents did not object. This permissive legislation meant that there would no statutory place for religious instruction in the school curriculum. It also meant that no teachers would be specifically trained to teach it. The continuing place of religious instruction in schools, however, was no doubt influenced by a number of factors. In a circular to Her Majesty’s Inspectors in 1878 the Scotch Education Department made it clear that the provision of the conscience clause, and the fact that the subject was not open to government inspection, should not lead managers and teachers to believe that ‘the State is indifferent to the moral character of schools, or in any way unfriendly to religious teaching’. In addition, the Educational Institute of Scotland continued to print in its annual reports its historic statement:

the Institute believes the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God and considers religious training of supreme importance in the Education of the

10 Scotch Education Department, Circular 153, 16 January 1878, page 2.
That religious instruction would continue in most schools was thanks mainly to the composition of the new school boards. Of the 5,662 members elected to the first boards formed after the passing of the Act, 1,450 were clergymen, among them 744 Established Church ministers (Belford, 1946: 150). A Church of Scotland nationwide enquiry conducted in 1875 concluded that out of 863 School Boards the parish minister was a member on 608 of them (Drummond & Bulloch, 1978: 137; RCS, 1875: 101-179). According to Bain (2003: 9), ‘the minister of the Church of Scotland in the parish was almost always in attendance at meetings concerned with education as under the Education Act of 1861 he was entitled to be. Although his voice could be only one among others, he often had an influence in meetings that was numerically disproportionate’. Later Bain qualified this by noting that ‘in a situation of competing denominational congregations, declining traditional allies and changing patterns of social allegiance, it was unlikely that the parish minister would always retain his traditional position …’ (ibid: 14). We may wonder why not every parish in 1873 elected the minister of the Church that had for centuries been involved in the supervision of schools and had always attempted to ensure a place for religious instruction on the curriculum. Possibly it reflected the changing composition of school board membership and the growing strength of other denominations, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, and other religious minorities elected by the ‘cumulative vote’, and also the decreasing numbers attending the Church of Scotland. Geraldine Vaughan observed:

The advent of school boards in Scotland was an opportunity for Catholics to organise their electorate and test their voting power ... in Greenock the seventeen candidates in 1873 represented various sections of the Protestant churches: there were one Episcopalian, one Congregationalist, one Quaker, two United Presbyterians, two Church of Scotland members and six members of the Free Kirk against two Roman Catholic candidates. Despite some initial reluctance the Catholic priesthood was involved in school boards elections from the start ... (Vaughan, 2012: 37)

Although in elections to school boards the franchise was limited to ‘owners or occupiers of lands or heritages of the annual value of not less than four pounds’, the actual membership on the boards meant that in time representatives from different social classes found a voice in school education. Bain, who analysed the social composition of school boards in West Lothian and Fife, concluded that ‘the previously dominant landowners, parish ministers and town councillors were at first joined and then gradually replaced ... by other groups ... this change in composition was provided for by the natural development which grew out of the potential in the Act of 1872 that was originally intended to safeguard social and denominational

---

11 See for example Educational Institute of Scotland Annual Reports, 1926-27 page xxi. The Historic Statement dates back to the formation of the Institute, 18th September, 1847.
minorities ...’ (2000: 68). Be that as it may, through its representation on school boards the Church of Scotland continued to have a say in school education and in particular in ensuring that religious instruction continued to be taught according to ‘use and wont’. To try and ensure that religious instruction was being taught efficiently many school boards continued to invite ministers of their own choosing to inspect religious instruction in their schools. In an attempt to ensure the provision and quality of religious instruction, in 1873 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland appointed A. J. Macquarrie as inspector of religious instruction. He inspected 234 schools over the year 1874–5 and 259 schools over the year 1878–9, his last year as inspector (RSCS, 1875: 23; 1879: 20). Ninety-seven of these were public schools, others included schools such as sessional schools and subscription schools which had not been transferred under the 1872 Act. In May 1879 the Church of Scotland General Assembly decided it could no longer afford Mr. Macquarrie’s services and he was dismissed (ECR, 1879: and Appendix I: 24.) In April 1880 a charity called the ‘Association of Aiding School Boards in the Inspection of Religious Instruction according to the Use and Wont in Scotland’, was set up. The terms of its constitution stated that school boards could request its help but no inspection would be carried out unless invited to do so by a school board. The association also proposed presenting prizes to children for excellence in religious knowledge. Some boards took up the association’s offer and inspections were carried out by specially chosen clergymen in places such as Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Stonehaven, Oban and Cononbridge.12 At the annual meeting of the association in 1906 it claimed to have examined 270 schools in 1904 and 319 in 1905 and that 180 school boards had invited their help (The Scotsman, 1906). Some boards set up their own methods of inspection. In 1883 the Scotch Education Department ruled that there was nothing to prevent a local board itself using money from the School Fund to inspect the efficiency of religious teaching (Scotland, 1969: 50-51). The Edinburgh School Board engaged Donald Mackinnon, Professor of Celtic Languages and History at the University, to inspect its schools. In 1901 he was able to report to the board’s management committee that he had inspected the delivery of religious instruction in 31 schools and that, in line with the conscience clause, out of 28,639 children only 45 had been withdrawn from all religious instruction and 486 from part of it, many of the latter being Jewish children who did not attend New Testament lessons.13 Here prizes for religious knowledge were provided by the Edinburgh Educational Trust. The Edinburgh school board also drew up a syllabus in religious instruction for its schools to follow and this provided the basis for Professor Mackinnon’s inspection. Similarly, the School Board of Leith appointed a Committee on Religious and Temperance Instruction which supervised the inspection of its schools and provided a syllabus for its teachers to follow. In spite of these attempts to support religious instruction the Church of Scotland was concerned that with the development of secondary education there would be less time allocated to religious instruction and in 1897 it set up a new committee – the Committee on the Nature and Extent of Religious

13 NRS, Minutes of Edinburgh School Board, GD342/77/1-4.
Instruction in Public Schools – and reminded ministers and elders of the importance of electing to school boards those in favour of retaining religious instruction.

Witherington has claimed that ‘school boards were to give religion a securer place and the churches a more effective influence under a state system than either had enjoyed in the schools for decades ... this grew from a recognition that the churches were so ineffective that the future place of religion in Scotland might well depend on the schools’ (Withrington, 1981:156). In 1878 a school inspector included this statement in his report:

The religious question engrosses men’s minds no longer. For the present it is no more a rock of difficulty. ... The boards, with surprising uniformity of action, or rather inaction, practically left the subject in the position in which they found it. They settled it everywhere and in every case on its traditional basis. They simply stereotyped and enforced the hereditary status quo, or what is termed ‘use and wont’.14

Witherington concluded, ‘One thing is certain: the direct influence of the churches on Scottish schooling was, despite all immediate appearances, greatly increased by the 1872 Act, for the elections to school boards gave a new platform for ministers of all sects to gain public attention for themselves and, by careful interpretation of ‘use and wont’, to find a ready means of insinuating matters of faith into the school day (Withrington, 2000: 61).

It could be argued that by enshrining the principle of ‘use and wont’ the established curriculum and pedagogy was perpetuated and the subject remained confessiona1 ‘religious instruction’ rather than developing into non-confessional ‘religious education’. Religious instruction, using the Bible and the Shorter Catechism, was delivered every day and where there was a strong Presbyterian influence it was unashamedly Christian, evangelical and confessional in its approach, teachers having been trained in colleges run by the churches. Anderson notes that some boards adopted ‘a modified secularism’ based simply on Bible reading without any dogmatic commentary and quotes from an 1874 survey which found that ‘out of 2,452 schools, 78 (run by seventeen school boards) taught the Bible without the Shorter Catechism, and 218 (run by forty-two boards) excluded both (Anderson, 1995: 181-182). Drummond and Bulloch concluded ‘evidently the will to get rid of it (i.e. the Shorter Catechism) had been fairly widespread, if usually ineffective, and the distribution of successful objections suggests that it owed more to doctrinal dissent rather than to secularism (Drummond & Bulloch, 1978: 137). In an era when a literal reading of the Bible was being questioned and there was a revolution in the way the Bible could be understood and interpreted,15 factual

14 This Report was quoted in a Scottish Education Department Memorandum, published in February 1943: Memorandum with regard to the provision made for Religious Instruction in the Schools in Scotland. (Cmd. 6426, Edinburgh: HMSO, 1943), 6.
15 1872 was within the era of what A. C. Cheyne described as Victorian Scotland’s Religious Revolution and men like John Tulloch, Professor of Systematic Theology at St Andrews alerted teachers and church members to Biblical Criticism. In 1862 he was appointed a clerk of the General Assembly, and from then on he took a leading part in the councils of the Church of Scotland. Tulloch was also deeply interested in the reorganization of education in Scotland, both in school and university.
knowledge of the Bible was still being conveyed by what has been called the ‘chalk and talk’ method of teaching. In his report in May 1875, A. J. Macquarrie, the Church of Scotland’s inspector of religious education, commenting on ‘the mere reading of the Bible in the school, chapter after chapter’, pointed out that, ‘reading is not teaching and one cannot be made an efficient substitute for the other’ (RSCS, 1875: 26). Recalling his time on the Glasgow School Board the pioneer socialist William Haddow wrote, ‘that children gained anything from parroting the points of distinction between Justification, Sanctification, Predestination and Adoption was more than doubtful’ (Haddow, 1943: 66). The results of a questionnaire sent out to Education Authorities in 1926 by the Church of Scotland Committee on Church and Nation, showed that out of the thirty-three authorities who replied, in twenty-two the Shorter Catechism was still being taught or at least was optional in the delivery of religious instruction (RSCS, 1926: 617). Moreover the traditional syllabus for religious instruction still did not take into consideration the beliefs of other religions necessary for the training of missionaries. An observation made at a World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh challenged the churches in Scotland to take account of other world religions and learn more about them. It pointed out that the study of comparative religion could be a way of recovering a fuller understanding of Christianity:

The conviction has grown that their [other religions] ‘confused cloud-world’ will be found to be ‘shot through and through with broken lights of a hidden sun.’ … Christianity, the religion of the Light of the World, can ignore no lights however ‘broken’ – it must take them all into account, absorb them all into its central glow … this quest of hers among the non-Christian religions, this discovery of their ‘broken lights’ may be to her the discovery of facets of her own truth…. (Gairdner, 1910: 137-138)

It would be many years before this challenge was taken up by those responsible for teaching religious instruction.17

In 1864 John Tulloch had expressed his concern: ‘I must venture to say that the most ominous and saddening signs I can see on the religious horizon are not the spirit of inquiry, whether within the Church or without it, but the unreasoning dogmatism with which in many cases this spirit has been met’ (Tulloch, 1864: 10). Later, the distinguished nineteenth century educationist Simon Laurie argued that the aim of the teacher of religious instruction was ‘to convey to the growing mind skilfully and effectively what you know and believe and feel … to bring into living activity in the consciousness of each child what may be called the sense of God’, but to encourage children to reflect in this way proved to be too radical an approach for teachers brought up with the question and answer use of the catechism (Laurie,

---

16 William Martin Haddow (1865–1945) was a founder member of the Independent Labour Party. He was involved in a number of educational schemes affecting the welfare of children in Scotland.

17 In 1968, a committee under the chairmanship of W. Malcolm Millar, Professor of Mental Health at the University of Aberdeen, was set up to examine and report on Religious and Moral Education in Scotland, ‘while making it clear that no change was contemplated in the statutory exclusion of the Secretary of State from responsibility for religious education in schools’. As a result of the conclusions and recommendations of this committee a new era of ‘Religious Education’ and Religious Studies opened up.
This criticism must be qualified by noting that changes in teaching methods were by this time being introduced into the training college syllabus.

TEACHER TRAINING COLLEGES

As part of its policy of promoting a high standard of education, the Church of Scotland early on had seen the need for professional teacher training with its emphasis not only on academic ability but also on the necessary pedagogical skills. Its Normal Schools (Training Colleges) were among the first in the United Kingdom and, thanks to the efforts of David Stow (1793-1864), led the way in providing instruction in ‘the art of teaching’ (ECR, 1834: 10-11). In spite of the financial struggle involved, the Church continued to extend and upgrade its training colleges, providing Scotland with well-qualified teachers throughout the nineteenth century. Not everyone judged the standards in the Church of Scotland’s training colleges as favourable. William Stevenson, Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Edinburgh University, told the Argyll Commission that at least a quarter of the teachers were ‘under the mark of what we would like to see for any schools in Scotland’ (Argyll Commission, 1865: 68). T. M. Devine, on the other hand, identified a clear improvement in Scottish education in the 1860s and concluded that ‘when compulsion took place in Scotland after the 1872 Act it was likely to result in consolidation and some improvement in an ongoing process rather than a radical reform leading to dramatic changes in educational performance’ (Devine, 2006: 394).

The Act stated that it shall be the duty of every parent to provide elementary education for children between five and thirteen years of age (section 69) and placed on the school boards the responsibility of ensuring that there was sufficient school accommodation to meet the needs of parishes and burghs (sections 26-28). As has been noted, some burgh schools which provided ‘the higher branches of knowledge’ were deemed to be ‘higher class public schools’. Moreover, boards were expected to establish and maintain infant schools for children under seven years of age and evening schools for those above thirteen (Section 40) but actual provision seems to have been patchy. It was laid on the Scotch Education Department to ensure that ‘the standard of education which now exists in public schools shall not be lowered’. H. M. Knox commented, ‘By this means it was hoped that the secondary education provided in the burgh schools and advanced instruction given in the parochial schools would be safeguarded, but there can be little doubt that the policy of putting secondary schools on the same footing as elementary ones was unfortunate’ (Knox, 1953: 77). The outcome of this policy was to hold back the development of secondary education. Since in the years immediately following the Act school boards were not permitted to use the education rate for maintaining higher class public schools, James Scotland has suggested that ‘it is possible that the percentage of children going forward to some form of secondary instruction actually decreased’ (Scotland, 1969: 5). In 1885, however, Henry Craik was appointed as Secretary of the Scotch Education Department to...
Department and one his aims was to promote secondary education. The outcome of these developments was a need for more qualified teachers and so an expansion of both the Free Church and Church of Scotland Training Colleges. In 1873 168 teachers were sent out from Church of Scotland Training Colleges; in 1903 it was 300.\(^{20}\) Marjorie Cruickshank noted that ‘the colleges claimed to be Presbyterian but unsectarian; Free Church students often attended colleges of the Established Church, and, similarly, members of the Church of Scotland were found in Free Church institutions' (Cruickshank, 1970: 85). In 1873 the Church of Scotland opened a college in Aberdeen but this one was to be limited to women students in order to cope with the increasing number of women applicants. At this time employment opportunities opened up for women teachers in state schools in an unprecedented way, especially in the infant sector. ‘The rhetoric of belief that women, more than men, were naturally more suited to teach young children was increasingly echoed in the offices of Whitehall’ (Fraser & Morris, 1990: 304). In an attempt to raise the qualifications of teachers, the Church encouraged its college students to take part in a scheme whereby selected students could attend university classes during the winter sessions. Until 1877 the Church paid the university fees of those undertaking these concurrent courses. In 1876 a Chair of Education was established in the University of Edinburgh and Simon Laurie, who had been secretary of the Church of Scotland’s Education Committee and so at that time responsible for the Church’s educational policy, was appointed as Professor. Whether the Church’s training colleges benefitted very much from this connection is open to question as, according to R. E. Bell, the relationship between the university courses offered by Laurie and the college courses was never quite clear and ‘the colleges were hardly likely to surrender to Laurie their teacher training function’ (Bell, 1988: 157). As if to make the point, the colleges began to pay more attention to teaching methods. Marjorie Cruickshank noted that ‘in 1881 the Principles of Education were included with Locke’s Thoughts on Education as recommended reading. There followed the introduction of faculty psychology as part of ‘Mental Science’, and the separation of the theory and practice of education’ (Cruickshank, 1970: 105).

By 1879 the number of students at the Church of Scotland’s College at Johnston Terrace in Edinburgh had become so great that the Education Committee opened a new building in Chambers Street and transferred the male students there. By the late 19th century the number of teachers required and the broadening curricular demands of secondary education meant that the colleges were no longer able to cope. The Church could not meet the increasing costs involved and entered into negotiations with the SED to hand over to the government the responsibility for teacher training and to sell its colleges to the newly created four Provincial Committees. The legal transfer was completed in 1907. The principal condition of the churches in agreeing to this major change was that religious instruction should be maintained in the curriculum of the colleges.

\(^{20}\) Church of Scotland Education Committee Minutes – 1903 -1905, NRC/CH1/43/7 (Minute Book No. 9).
CONCLUSION

It is possible to regard the eventual passing of the 1872 Act as the result of a weak Church succumbing to the inevitable. Anderson described the Church as ‘now ready to compromise because its power to block change seemed to be crumbling’ (Anderson, 1995: 67). Withrington believed that, ‘the Churches were aware of falling numbers and attendances and if religious instruction could be secured it might help with mission and evangelisation. Organised religion was coming more and more under the attack of secularists …’ (Withrington, 1972) and later in an article in 1981 in the Records of the Scottish Church History Society, he wrote ‘in the 1860s and 1870s indifference to religion – shown particularly in the continuing, and increasing, non-attendance at church services and in attacks on all organised religion…still tormented the Scottish Presbyterian denominations’ (Withrington, 1981: xix). A report of the Church of Scotland’s Christian Life and Work Committee (set up in 1868) confirmed the drift from the Church and the low attendance rate. Drummond and Bulloch concluded: – ‘Whatever was happening in the other Churches, the figures returned [by a church census in 1876] showed beyond doubt that all was far from well within the Church of Scotland’ (1978: 167).

On the other hand, Callum Brown has shown that levels of church attendance were not as bad as previous historians had claimed:

It seems clear to most specialists in the field that the levels of churchgoing revealed in the 1851 religious census were historically very high – in Scotland the figures were marginally higher [than in England] despite a markedly high number of non-returns from enumerators. … Despite the problems with the data, it is possible to say with reasonable certainty that church membership per capita grew from the 1840s to reach a peak in England and Wales in 1904 and in Scotland in 1905. (Brown, 2001: 161-163)

In 1877 the Christian Life and Work Committee reported to the General Assembly that ‘the membership of the Church is increasing with a rapidity that may cause the unwary to boast’ (RSCS, 1877). The writer of a pamphlet in 1881 gives the communicant membership of the Church of Scotland as 436,00 in 1870 rising to 460,526 in 1872 and to 515,786 in 1878 (Anon, 1881: 22).

Although the Church of Scotland had lost its direct control of school education it continued to influence religious instruction through its Training Colleges, its Sunday schools and its ministerial representation on school boards. Furthermore, indirectly the Church actually benefitted from the Act in several ways. No longer preoccupied with schools, the Church of Scotland could now turn its attention to its interaction with society. Commenting on the Church’s loss of management of school education, J. H. S. Burleigh concluded: ‘if these changes involved loss of influence the loss was abundantly made good by the gains brought about by these reforms, and the Church was freed to devote itself to other tasks which it soon found to its hand’ (Burleigh, 1960: 382). These tasks included an extension in the Church’s outreach to its parishes demonstrated, for example, by the publication of its magazine Life and Work in 1879. Withrington (1981: 157) concluded that ‘One of the significant developments of the later 1860s and the earlier 1870s is the serious self-analysis which the presbyterian churches engaged
...’ and R. D. Anderson noted that ‘social welfare activities in schools, and attempts to extend social discipline to adolescents ... were stimulated by the Act by diverting philanthropic funds and energies, particularly those of the churches, away from the simple provision of schools ... Sunday schools, now devoted exclusively to religious education, were an obvious example’ (1995: 199-200). This seems to be corroborated by C. G. Brown’s finding that ‘the 20 years between 1870 and 1890 were probably the high point of the Sunday-school movement in Scotland’:

With the creation of the national day-school system in 1873, the churches put renewed faith in the ability of Sunday schools to maintain religious education amongst the young people. Even the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, which by its own admittance had been niggardly in its support of Sunday schools, urged that more of them be set up to counteract the ‘new method’ of instruction in Public Schools [which] is clearly unfavourable to any adequate attention being paid to the communication of religious knowledge (1981: 17)

In the same article Brown claimed that ‘in one sense, the election of Sunday-school promoters to membership of the school boards gave the movement greater status and public recognition’ (ibid).

From the 1850s to the 1880s all denominations moved from regarding evangelisation as a cure to social ills to caring for the physical and social welfare of people and acknowledging the influence and effect of the social environment. In his article on the ministry of Norman MacLeod, Peter Hillis concluded that this was ‘a change which transcended denominational barriers; Established, Free and United Presbyterian Churches all gradually shifted their emphasis away from attributing poverty, intemperance, and social disorder to failings in man’s spiritual self, towards a greater realisation of the environment’s role in shaping character’ (Hillis, 1992: 264). In a similar vein Callum Brown wrote of ‘a small band of non-political Christian socialists who sought a new social theology ... Churchmen went beyond traditional evangelicalism, which viewed social problems as the products of immorality, to regard poverty, insanitary and overcrowded housing, and ill-health as in themselves immoralities which could not be countenanced in a Christian country’ (Brown, 1997: 135). Brown also noted that ‘trades unions supported church candidates at school board elections in the 1870s and 1880s and joined with the churches in opposing the Sunday opening of art galleries and the Sunday running of trams’ (ibid, 134).

The Church of Scotland’s social reawakening at the close of the nineteenth century had had its roots in A. H. Charteris21 persuading the General Assembly in 1868 to set up the Committee on Christian Life and Work, which in 1870 sent out a questionnaire to all parish ministers: ‘to inquire as to the progress of Christian work in the country; and to consider and report as to the best means of promoting evangelistic efforts and so guiding those engaged in them as to secure their cooperation with the office-bearers in order that the ministry of this Church may be

---

21 Charteris was licensed as a minister in 1858 and served in three parishes until 1868 when he was appointed Professor of Biblical Criticism and Biblical Antiquities at Edinburgh University.
aided by voluntary Christian efforts...’. From the returns from ministers the committee concluded that the Church was well aware of its shortcomings. ‘The general conclusion in the Church is that our membership ought to be more active than it is -- there is much ground for congratulation in the ‘increasing uneasiness among us regarding our supineness and unprofitableness - there were never so many congregations organised for missionary and benevolent purposes as there are now’ (RSCS, 1875: 561). According to Burleigh, ‘for the first time the Church of Scotland bestirred itself in the work of evangelism and encouraged church life in local congregations’ (Burleigh, 1960: 391-392). Organisations such as Bands of Hope and the Young Men’s Guild, thrived. Brown believed that, ‘From church reports in the 1860s and 1870s, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that working-class Protestantism was growing and being better satisfied with faster church building, a phenomenally-wide range of voluntary organisations, and more attractive religious worship’ and with that, ‘religious voluntary organisations for the working classes also grew enormously from the 1870s’ (Brown, 1997: 116-117). John F. McCaffrey agreed with this, concluding that ‘by the 1870s, both the Free Church and the UP’s found themselves in competition with a revived Church of Scotland, now growing at a faster rate than its rivals ... a new sense of social mission was running through all three denominations ...’ (McCaffrey, 1998: 72).

The Rev. John Macleod, minister of Govan Parish Church, Glasgow, from 1875 to 1898 believed that the parish minister was the servant not of a congregation only, but of the parish. Ian Bradley (formerly Professor of Cultural and Spiritual History at the University of St Andrews) offered this description of McLeod in a centenary lecture he gave at Govan:

MacLeod threw himself into schemes of social service. He took a keen interest in education, serving on the local school board from 1871-83 and from 1885 to 1886 and setting up a Young Men’s Literary Association which was deliberately organised on a parish wide rather than congregational basis. He was deeply involved in the setting up of soup kitchens at times of economic depression and slump in the shipyards and distributing relief to the poor in the parish.’ (Bradley, 1998)

The eventual outcome of this renewed involvement with social issues was that General Assembly set up a Social Work Committee in 1904.

The successful passing of the 1872 Act contributed to the already ongoing heated debate on Disestablishment. ‘The disestablishment of the Church of Ireland on January 1871 stimulated hopes of disestablishment in Scotland and the Education Act seemed a step in this direction’ (Drummond & Bulloch, 1978: 94).

The passing of the Patronage Bill encouraged churchmen like Charteris and Lord Balfour of Burleigh to press for an approach in the interests of union to the other Presbyterian Churches. (A Committee on Union with other Presbyterian Churches had been appointed in 1872 and continued till 1880.) Any advance in this direction, however, was thwarted by the Disestablishment controversy. In 1874

---

22 The Church Patronage (Scotland) Act 1874, An Act to alter and amend the laws relating to the Appointment of Ministers to Parishes in Scotland, was passed on 7 August 1874.
the United Presbyterian Church Synod resolved that ‘it is the duty of this Synod to declare... that while ever ready seriously to consider proposals for union with other churches on a scriptural basis and to unite with every branch of the Church of Christ in all Christian work and service, this church must continue to testify and labour in all suitable ways for the Disestablishment of the Established Church of this land’ (Synod of the United Presbyterian Church (Scotland), 1874: 4). ‘The Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church viewed the Patronage Act as failing to tackle the main issue, namely the Church-State relationship. Theological differences also made discussions on union difficult. The Free Church objected to what it called ‘the Broad-School theology’ whereas, according to Stewart Brown, ‘The Church (of Scotland) became more open to the view that theology should develop in creative engagement with the surrounding culture and that theological advance must not be unduly restricted by historical confessions, especially the Westminster Confession’ (Brown, 2019: 123). It is of interest to note that Geraldine Vaughan seems to suggest that having to work together on school boards in the interests of school education may have helped, at least in that context, to improve relationships between Catholics and Protestants: ‘common efforts and working on various committees between 1873 and 1918 did favour a certain modus vivendi ... Scottish Protestant members of school boards were willing to acknowledge the work accomplished by Catholic members ... from mid-Victorian to the late Victorian era, religious strife within local institutions seemed to have lessened (Vaughan, 2012: 42).

In the end, while the Church of Scotland’s influence in Scottish education was much diminished by the Act, it was empowered in other ways: for example, to develop its social policy and through voluntary organisations to address the needs of the working-class in an increasingly secular world. In his closing address to the 1882 General Assembly ten years after the passing of the Act, the Moderator the Rev. W. Milligan told members: ‘it may be true that the working class constitute the bulk of our membership’ (Milligan, 1882: 9). Stewart J. Brown concluded:

The Church of Scotland of 1874 did remain in a close connection with the state and it retained its historic national endowments, including teinds and glebes. But it was now more an endowed national church rather than a religious establishment in the old sense ... it continued with a growing effectiveness as the nineteenth century drew to a close, to express the ideal of a Scotland elevated by moral and spiritual principles and maintaining a continuity with its Christian past. (2019: 124-125)

ABBREVIATIONS

RSCS – Reports on the Schemes of the Church of Scotland
ECR – Report of the Education Committee
NRS – National Records of Scotland
REFERENCES


NRS CH1.43.3, 1872. *National Records of Scotland: Memorandum by the Education Committee of the Church of Scotland on the bearing of the Education Act 1872 on Voluntary or Denominational Schools*,


Synod of the United Presbyterian Church (Scotland), 1874. *Synod's resolutions anent Patronage*, Edinburgh:


Tulloch, J., 1864. *Introductory Lecture delivered at St. Mary's College, St Andrews, November 21, 1864*. Edinburgh:


