



School days in Haddington, East Lothian: The Boyhood and Youth of Norman Porteous

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The Knox Institute of Haddington, which Norman Porteous attended from 1903, was one of 980 new schools in Scotland following the surge of school building after 1872. This Gothic stone structure was built as one of many outcomes of the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 when the work of administering education was transferred from church to secular authorities. Only 24 schools out of 2812 remained in the hands of Church of Scotland.¹ School-building was arguably the first and the most visible of the activities of the School Boards elected by rate payers which received their grants from the Scotch Education Department ('Scotch' was changed to Scottish in 1918).

The first pupils entered the Knox Institute on 1st October 1879. It was named in recognition of the generally accepted fact that John Knox was born in Haddington and that he had zealously promulgated the establishment of Parish Schools. It was formally opened in January 1880 by the Scottish statesman and philosopher, Mr Arthur James Balfour, later 1st Earl Balfour of Whittinghame and Prime Minister from 1902-06.² The handsome statue of John Knox in his Geneva gown by D. W. Stevenson was set in a niche in the central clock-tower, being presented by the Misses Traill of Aberlady. The layout of the school consisted of a central hall with spacious classrooms surrounding it on three floors.

The Porteous boys, Alexander and Norman, enrolled in the Elementary School of the Knox Institute at the age of five, one year earlier than most pupils. Although the age range for attendance was five to fourteen, School Boards did not insist on attendance at five years of age; there was a widespread belief that the real starting age was six.³ Attendance of the children of farm and mill workers was often spasmodic. 'Usually the farm-labourer's child, of whatever ability or aspiration, was rushed into work as rapidly as possible. . . the pushing of the daughter into domestic service, first at home, then some richer person's scullery'.⁴

Even during school terms children were needed during sowing and harvesting, as well as on Hiring Friday early in February when farm workers and their families met in Market Street of Haddington to seek employment and a farm cottage.⁵ Over forty per cent of children were allowed to leave school at age thirteen provided they could demonstrate competence in reading, writing and arithmetic. In 1911, only 13% of children in Scotland aged fifteen were still at school.⁶ The Knox Institute was therefore a mixed ability school unlike city Higher Grade Schools which, to quote Sir Henry Craik, the Secretary of the Scotch Education Department, ‘are for those who have the brains and industry to profit by them, and for them alone. . . . We must train only those who are worth training in these schools; and the rest must get betimes to such work as the elementary education. . . . may enable them to do’.⁷

The only absence incurred by Norman was as a result of an accident in which he was almost crushed to death under a wheel of a passing horse and cart driven by its inebriated owner. Fortunately for Norman the cart was fitted with the new Dunlop pneumatic tyres which replaced the old iron rims under which Norman would almost certainly have died. Although he suffered some bruising he returned to school in a somewhat delicate state after only a few days.

As far as the quality of teaching is concerned, the SED aimed to phase out the pupil teacher apprenticeship system and replace it with formal teacher training.⁸ Norman’s father John Dow Porteous was a pupil teacher at the age of thirteen at Loanhead about 1865 and after teacher training at Moray House Free Church Teachers’ Training College in Edinburgh he obtained a teaching post in Forres where he remained for the next six years. He was one of the 62% of teachers in Scotland who were certificated at that time (this rose to 97.5% by 1914).⁹ John Porteous graduated MA at Edinburgh in 1879 and was appointed a junior master at the Knox Institute in 1883 with a salary of £90 per annum. He was appointed Rector of the senior school in 1894. Norman’s brother Alex followed in his father’s footsteps becoming a pupil teacher in 1909 in the Elementary School of the Knox Institute.¹⁰ However, in Norman’s time Scottish education was ‘regarded. . . as a matter of low social priority once the perceived needs of the middle

class had been attended to, and once a channel had been opened for a limited number of working-class children to use secondary school and university as a means of upward social mobility. Neither the Scotch Education Department, nor the teaching profession, nor the public at large, expressed much interest in achieving high standards for the bulk of the population'.¹¹

The purpose of the curriculum according to Sir Henry Craik was 'to socialise children into a morally responsible attitude to society, supportive of the Union and the Empire'.¹² Norman benefited from Craik's new vision in which he abolished the 'payment by results' system of financing schools, much to the delight of teachers. In addition he abolished the six Standards and encouraged schools to devise their own curricula. New subjects in addition to reading, writing, arithmetic and religion were introduced: singing, dancing and needlework, and for older children, English literature, geography, history and science. John Porteous spent some time in Germany for the specific purpose of introducing the German language into his curriculum at the Knox Institute; possibly the first to do so in Scotland. Whilst some curricular innovation was permissible, the SED's inspectors ensured standardisation throughout Scotland.

In a primary class size of about 60 children (the legal maximum from 1905) teaching methods could not be other than formal: reciting the tables, copperplate handwriting, reading aloud and the Shorter Catechism. The ubiquitous slate was used before advancing to the pen nib, the ink well and paper. The Merit Certificate was introduced by Craik to mark the end of elementary education and Norman was one of the 4.8 per cent of boys aged eleven in Scotland who attained this equivalence to the old Standard V. It is worth mentioning that girls outperformed boys even then: 5.7% gained the Merit Certificate.¹³

Discipline was strict but with the ending of 'payment by results' (grants to schools depended on the performance of children in the six Standard Tests)¹⁴ there was some relaxation from corporal punishment; but discipline remained harsh and the tawse (the belt) was the instrument of punishment for many years; it would take another eighty years

before corporal punishment was abolished. Norman never mentioned discipline except to say that the Knox Institute was ‘a good school with no nonsense; we were well taught.’

The children entered the school through separate entrances for boys and girls. Classroom seating arrangements were formal: again, boys were separated from girls in rows and columns; the clever boys at the back of the room and the dunces at the front. Norman sat at the back with his friend William Gillies. They sat next to each other during their secondary education for six years and were dux medallists in successive years. Gillies, like Norman, was destined to become Principal of the college in which he had studied: in Gillies’ case, Principal of the Edinburgh College of Art, to be knighted in 1970; and in Norman’s, Principal of New College where he had been a distinguished student. Norman was full of admiration for his artist friend and commented: ‘although our interests differed markedly this in no way diminished our friendship’. Another contemporary was the mountainous Andrew (Jock) Wemyss who distinguished himself as a Scottish International rugby player, sports journalist and radio commentator. Norman recalled him as tall and athletic who ‘simply could not walk, he ran everywhere and rarely walked through a gate, he leapt over it. I met him in Ireland during the war (1914-18); he was a fearsome sight with his black eye-patch over the eye he had lost in France having been struck in the face by shrapnel. The Irish troublemakers vanished from sight when he appeared. Even with one eye he played rugby for Scotland on several occasions after the war.’

As important as his schooling Norman continuously emphasised his debt of gratitude to his parents and to the encouragement of his elder brother. His mother was an accomplished musician and his father gave his sons arguably the greatest gift a parent can bestow - a love of literature, language, learning, and the love of God. This would lead to a love of scholarship and in Norman’s case the Church. Norman explained in detail their evening routine after school. His father read the Reverend John Brown’s *Self-Interpreting Bible* to his sons every evening. Norman explained that this was not in the least demanding but a pleasurable evening ritual and especially enjoyable with their father’s explanations

of Bible stories and the encouragement of their insatiable curiosity. Occasionally, he interrupted their play with suggestions of a short reading from such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels* and simplified versions of Homer and Virgil. Another favourite was Charles Dickens. Their boyhood was one of happy simplicity with few distractions in which their imaginations were stimulated by Greek antiquity and a love of learning.

About the age of fifteen Norman decided that his future lay in the church and his father, quietly and without fuss, suggested that he should learn Greek. He provided the books and, with his brother who had already mastered the fundamentals of Latin and had already taught himself Greek, they helped Norman achieve his ambition. To quote Norman: 'I owe everything to my parents and to my brother.' When Norman won first bursary for entry to the University of Edinburgh in 1916 he averred: 'I held my own with other boys from more prestigious schools.' Alexander and Norman Porteous took 1st class honours degrees at both Edinburgh and Oxford, and Norman at New College gained distinction in Old Testament Studies. Their studies were interrupted when they were conscripted and became commissioned officers during the 1914–18 War to serve in France.

From my many chats with Norman, when he happily recalled his affection and deep respect for his parents during his childhood at home and his schooling at the Knox Institute, it became eminently clear that his life was moulded from an early age and his that admiration of his parents, teachers and friends led to total dedication to his work and to God. I stood in awe of his scholarship and his monumental work and study and I told him so, but in his self-effacing way he would have none of it. He simply averred that: 'I was only good at passing exams' - the greatest understatement and humility that I have ever encountered.