



**John Stevenson, *Fulfilling a Vision: The Contribution of the Church of Scotland to School Education, 1772–1872* (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2012), pp. 188. £18.00**

It is often said that the tedious business of ‘lining out’ each separate line of a psalm by the precentor was an unnecessary import during the seventeenth century from South of the Border where the literacy levels were lower. That the Scots were readers is evidenced by a 1579 Act of Parliament which required all households of substance to possess a ‘bible and psalme buke in vulgare language’ – the latter being the earliest Book of Common Order which also contained the Minister’s or Reader’s prayers and the Calendar of festal days.

By the time of David Livingstone, the bicentenary of whose birth falls this year, a ten-year-old mill worker such as he could already have attended the parish school, could now after the day’s work continue in the mill’s own school, would study in his teenage years in the well-stocked library of the local Relief Church, and ultimately enter a college which was said to be possibly the liveliest centre of scientific education in Great Britain at that time, where he rubbed shoulders with such pioneers as ‘Paraffin’ Young (who became a lifelong friend) and other leaders in their field. Thus was vindicated the aim of the First Book of Discipline (1560) to provide in the parish schools ‘vertuous education and godly upbringing of the youth of this realme’, by this time augmented by schools provided by employers and benefactors. The other side of the coin was that a product of the system such as was Livingstone, when it was suggested he himself become parish schoolmaster, could only have done so had he changed from being a non-conformist in Scottish terms and joined the Established Church.

The year the future missionary explorer reached the age of 11, the Church’s General Assembly, aware of how patchy the provision nevertheless still remained, set up a Committee with the ambitious aim of realising the Reformers’ ideal from its own resources, with particular attention to the Highlands and the growing urban areas where there was the greatest lack. It is the work of this Education Committee that is John Stevenson’s focus in this book, leading to a climax in the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 when the system we

know today was largely established. This is prefaced by an analysis of the half-century preceding the inauguration of the committee and by a helpful account of the medieval foundations upon which the Reformers built.

By this point in Stevenson's span, several challenges had arisen to render Knox's simple prescription of 'a school in every parish' difficult to achieve, among them the parsimony of the heritors (the landowners, whose original duty was the provision of the necessary finance for the church), the fissures in the church itself when new denominations set up their own schools, the sheer growth and mobility of the population, the uncontrolled proliferation of schools provided by different bodies and the issues of control and superintendence that this raised. Added to this were political, social and intellectual developments (for example, electoral reform, the French Revolution and responses such as Paine's *Rights of Man*) which underlined the importance of individual ability to make informed choices – informed, it must be said, not only by knowledge but by the religious and moral precepts of which the Established Church saw itself as custodian and mentor.

Much has already been written about the developments leading to the 1872 Act, not least on the contribution of the Kirk, and a good deal of this is critical of how its anxiety about losing control of its parish schools as against the proposed national system jeopardised the outcome. What Stevenson brings to these broad brush analyses is a detailed account of the work of Committee and Assembly, a new focus that not only shows the contribution of the Church in a more positive light but fleshes out the issues in a way helpful in understanding the events of the time as well as the controversies of the present. Properly critical of the Church's defensiveness of its hegemony, he shows from where this sprang, in the conviction of a responsibility that went back to the Reformation and ratified in the 1707 Acts of Union. Further, the period in question was a time of buoyancy when the Established Church was undergoing something of a resurgence, and it was thus arguing out of a consciousness of its duty of representation.

There was also its track record to date. The author reminds us of the quality of what had been provided in the past: a breadth of curriculum which not only embraced the three Rs and the classics,

but navigation, book-keeping, astronomy, and many practical skills, not least the fact that in Gaelic regions the medium of education was that language – a language which came to be unofficially but actively discouraged after 1872. There was also an emphasis on proper training and the setting up of the ‘normal schools’, adequate salaries, proper supervision, and the improvement of conditions. Stevenson suggests that the Committee was at many points justified in its resistance to the emerging Act: for example, in the inability of London-based departments to appreciate the particular nature of Scotland and the flexibility that was required – in teacher training, in matching school provision to the seasonal demands of agriculture, in salaries, or the tradition of a long-standing unified national system when all attended the same schools. Gradually church schools were handed over to the state system, but the legacy of the Committee continues in much that is characteristic of contemporary Scottish education, not least in religious education, which is still protected by law.

*Fulfilling a Vision* started life as a doctoral thesis and its materials derive in large measure from committee minutes and Assembly deliverances. It is hardly a promising start, but Dr Stevenson also brings long commitment to Scottish education, recognised by an Honorary Fellowship of the Educational Institute of Scotland, and by a prize given annually in his name by the Church of Scotland to schools for excellence in the fields of religious observance and religious education. This, combined with a considerable narrative skill, brings a clarity and a fluency to the account of a century during which issues that still engage us today were first encountered. An interesting aspect of the layout of the book is the interleaving of Appendices between chapters, when more concentrated material can be introduced without interrupting the flow of the account, but which also serve to relax and then re-engage the attention.

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