

96 **EDUCATION IN BOTHKENNAR PARISH IN THE TIME
OF THE REV. WILLIAM NIMMO, HISTORIAN OF STIRLINGSHIRE**

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INTRODUCTION

Some initial explanation is due to the reader regarding both the scope of this contribution and the form in which it appears. The substance of what follows was first presented in 1979 as one of a series of annual talks given in Bothkennar Parish Church to mark the connection of Stirlingshire's first historian with the Parish, where he was minister from 1765 until 1782. The series of talks was initiated in 1978 by the present minister, the Rev. W. B. Maclaren, whose plan it is that each speaker should consider one aspect of Nimmo's times. In the present case this was education.

For the historian who is well versed in the development of education in Central Scotland there will be nothing very new in what follows, for Bothkennar is representative of the geographical area and the historical times rather than remarkable in any major way, but the details themselves may be of some interest, and perhaps the argued view of the general context into which those details have been put may lead to some useful discussion.

THE GENERAL CONTEXT

The years from 1765 to 1782 were not highly significant years in education, either in the Parish of Bothkennar or in the Central Lowlands of Scotland as a whole. Perhaps they were in parts of the Highlands, or in some of the new academies that were springing up, but not in Bothkennar. The reason they were not in any way outstanding or unusual was simply that the development of education in Bothkennar in the second half of the 18th century fell quite clearly between two periods of tremendous upheaval and social change. The first was the Protestant Reformation, which spread throughout the Scottish Lowlands in the 16th and 17th centuries, altering the whole way in which schooling was looked at. The second was the Industrial Revolution, which began in a sense on the very doorstep of the Parish, and which increasingly throughout the 19th century altered the whole basis of Lowland society from a rural to an industrialised economy. As a result of that 19th century change education was never quite the same again, and education in

Bothkennar in Nimmo's time therefore falls quite clearly between these two epoch-making events in our national history. Because this is so, it is proposed to look at some aspects of education in Bothkennar that are recorded in the parish registers against the much wider background of these two great changes: The Protestant Reformation that came before Nimmo's time, and the Industrial Revolution that followed so quickly upon it. The events recorded as parish history only make sense to us two hundred years later if we look at them in this way.

We therefore begin with a very brief consideration of what the Protestant Reformation meant in Scottish education, of what that first great burst of reforming zeal meant for schools and schooling. The older (Roman Catholic) Church had depended upon the priest as an intermediary between God and sinful men. When at the Reformation the priest was removed as a go-between, and men were encouraged to have direct contact *with* God, and to have direct responsibility *to* God, it was necessary to find a new source of guidance for them. The Bible became that source. But knowing the Bible for oneself meant being able to read it for oneself, and being able to read eventually meant schools and teachers. So we find in the educational programmes of European Reformers like Luther and Calvin, and in the educational plans of Scotsmen like John Knox and his contemporaries, provision for what we would nowadays call universal literacy. Wherever especially the Calvinistic model of a Reformed Church sprang up — in Europe, in America, in Scotland — so in time a school and a schoolmaster became associated with it. Reading the Bible in order to save one's soul led to schools and to schooling in a direct and most positive way. Additionally, since the Protestant Church was essentially a reforming Church, those who planned the Reformation in Scotland aimed to change the whole of a corrupt society for the better, and the two instruments through which they intended to do so were the pulpit and the school. In this scheme the school's functions were twofold. First of all, in order that a moral, Bible-reading flock should be created in every parish, all children were to be taught the rudiments of reading, writing, arithmetic, Bible and the Catechism. Secondly, in order that leaders should be found to continue the reformation of society, the most able boys were sifted out and taken on eventually to university, to return as the ministers, doctors, lawyers and schoolmasters that continuing improvement needed. No academic talent was to be wasted in farm or field work. No father was to keep an able child from further education. Children who were too poor to attend school were assisted to do so by the Kirk Session, and those who needed support at university were given it by the Presbytery.

At this point it is necessary to keep very much in mind that the society was an almost entirely rural one; it was a slow-moving society; it was a society without our large cities, with few large towns, and even with comparatively few villages; it comprised on the whole, a scattered and a sparse population based in agriculture. It was a society terribly dependent upon a reasonable harvest, and very quickly reduced to widespread hunger, disease, misery and death by a bad one. It was for the reform and running of such a society that the Reformers drew up their plans for one kirk and one school in every parish, and in such a society that they intended the school to be an efficient instrument for changing the lives of people. The basic ideal was to change society — and then to hold that reformed society static and unchanging over the years. Bothkennar in Nimmo's day reflected the static period which followed the far-reaching changes of the Scottish Reformation: it was a late 18th century Lowland Scottish country parish with its one kirk and its one school, long established in just the way that the 16th and 17th century Reformers had wanted. It was a parish that had survived some local difficulties associated with early 18th century Episcopacy, and had moved on beyond the changes of the first great burst of reform into times that can only seem to us — with our awareness of the Industrial Revolution to come — somewhat humdrum and repetitive in educational, as in other, matters. It was a parish that, by the evidence of its own kirk records, would seem to have been providing fairly effectively the kind of schooling that the Reformers thought was necessary to keep rural society reformed. This is the context in which are placed the details that have been recorded of education in Bothkennar in William Nimmo's time. These years constitute a period that falls right between two great changes, managing to embody the ideals of the first in a rather quiet way before the onset of the second began to disrupt first the economy and then the society of the Forth and Clyde Valley.

EDUCATIONAL PROVISION AND SCHOOL LIFE

Into this general context can be put some of the details of the schooling provided in Bothkennar in Nimmo's times: details of what school life was like both for the masters and for the pupils. This can be done by drawing upon the surviving minutes of the Parish itself, but now and again, where these are silent, by looking at what is known of surrounding parishes like Larbert, Airth, and Falkirk that would not be greatly different from Bothkennar in the 18th century. In considering these details of school life in a post-Reformation

parish, it has to be kept in mind that we are dealing with the educational needs of a very small entirely rural and agricultural area just under $2\frac{1}{2} \times 2\frac{1}{2}$ km; a parish with between only 600 and 700 souls scattered throughout it; a parish that in the eyes of the Reformers could very readily be served by one kirk and one school at a fairly central point within it to which both young and old could travel even in winter; a parish in which in the 1790s there were 133 children under the age of ten, and therefore probably less than half of that number of school age.

From the very earliest entries in the extant Bothkennar Kirk Session Records it is quite clear that the Parish was being provided with both a school and a schoolmaster in almost the way that the Reformers had wished. By at least 1725 — some 40 years before Nimmo — there were in existence a schoolhouse and a schoolmaster's house and yard or garden, and the only difficulty seemed to be that instead of the Heritors having provided a school — as the Act of 1696 required — the Kirk Session had in fact paid for it out of the poor's fund. This wasn't an uncommon situation, but in 1725 the Session made it quite clear that the Heritors — absent or not — would now have to meet their legal obligations, and so the schoolmaster was told 'to flitt' from all his accommodation as a means of putting pressure on the Heritors. A stent (assessment) was quickly agreed in order to repay the Session; eventually the original outlay of £140 Scots (about £12 Sterling) was met; and from then on all seems to have been well. Periodical repairs were met by the Session, but only until the Heritors paid up; and occasionally in the 1760s and 1790s the Session itself met in what seems to have been a school in good repair (The Register, various dates 1725-92).

An 18th century building had little resemblance to a school like Larbert High, or even Carronshore or Carron Primary — not even the old ones — but was something much more modest. It is unfortunate that there are no surviving pictures or plans; only the detail that the cost of the school was £140 Scots (ibid 9th October 1727). But it would be a not unreasonable guess that it had one not very large classroom, with living accommodation for the master up above. If so, the whole two-storey building would probably not have exceeded a quarter of the present Bothkennar Church in size, and since it is recorded that thatch was bought in 1726 (ibid 3rd October 1726), it is reasonable to suppose that the roof was at that time thatched, and perhaps leaked occasionally during a stormy winter. The floor might have been earthen, and covered by rushes or straw collected by the children — a custom common in those days. The desks would not be individual seats as now, but long, common, wooden benches shared by many pupils.

We know that the schoolmaster had a house as well as a school (ibid 9th April 1725). In that he was fortunate, since under the Act of 1696 the Heritors needed legally to provide only a building for a school. The same Act also entitled the master to a legal salary of between 100 and 200 merks (a merk was a silver coin worth 13½d Sterling). Again the records tell us that by at least 1725 a salary of 100 merks was agreed (ibid 9th July 1725). This was the sum still being paid in the 1790s, after Nimmo's time, though by then the basic salary of 100 merks was being supplemented voluntarily by some of the Heritors in an attempt to attract good masters (The Statistical Account 1794). It is perhaps not easy for us to appreciate in these times of annual salary increases of £500, that between 1696 and 1803, in a full century of gradually rising prices, schoolmasters saw no change at all in their legal salaries. For them there was no Houghton, and no Clegg. Like their contemporaries elsewhere in central Scotland, the schoolmasters of Bothkennar therefore sought to augment their salaries in as many ways as they could. Thus we know from the records that almost always the master was appointed session clerk immediately after his acceptance as schoolmaster by the Heritors and the Presbytery, and that throughout the 18th century he received from the Session £12.12.0 Scots (or £1.1.0 Sterling) annually as clerk (The Register 10th November 1723, 25th May 1759, 4th June 1794). He was also normally appointed precentor, and the records again and again register his receipt of 5/- or 6/- Sterling for his services at Communion (e.g. ibid 26th May 1728, 16th December 1793). He shared in collections made at baptisms; he received fees for recording burials; he sought payment for acting as treasurer (e.g. ibid 1st June 1726, 12th September 1793) — all these were small but welcome additions to his legal income.

One source of income that he had very much under his own control of course, since it varied with his academic reputation, was schollage, or pupils' fees. What these amounted to is exemplified in the recorded appointment of Mr. James Izat, Preacher of the Gospel, as schoolmaster in 1773, when the Heritors and Session on 12th February

'did and hereby do appoint, That in time Coming the School-Wages Should be as follows, Viz, The teaching of English & Writing one Shilling & Sixpence Sterl; per Quarter, The Teaching of Arithmetic and the Latin tongue, Two Shillings & Sixpence Sterl: per Qr. — And Further they appoint that the School-wages Shall be paid upon the entry of the Children to the School, Either Monthly or Quarterly as the Parents please, as the meeting are perswaded this will tend to the interest of the Children.'

Some pupils of course could not pay, and for them the Session again and again recorded outlay from its funds towards their support as poor scholars (e.g. *ibid* 24th January 1731, 14th May 1798).

All these sources of basic and additional income still added up to a relatively small annual sum: about £20 Sterling in the early 1790s, at a time when farm servants could earn about £10 Sterling per year, and the grave-digger received 1/6d (7½p) for digging a grave and ringing the funeral bell (*The Statistical Account* 1794; *The Register* 12th February 1773). As the Reverend Mr. Dickson, successor to William Nimmo, wrote in this *Old Statistical Account*

'It is much to be wished that, in this age of liberality and improvement, something were done for the encouragement of schoolmasters, many of whom, having families to support, must often be straitened to obtain even the necessaries of life.'

This sometimes meant that parish schoolmasters did not stay overlong in a post, restlessly moving on in search of greater emoluments, but Bothkennar seems to have been reasonably congenial, since during the 17 years of Nimmo's charge — 1765 to 1782 — there were only three masters, possibly four if he inherited a year at the end of John Russell's time. These were as follows

James Anderson, who served 6 years, and apparently died in office;

James Izat, who served less than 1 year, and who probably left to become a minister, as was not uncommon;

John Donaldson, who spent 12 years in his post.

(*The Register*, 16th July 1766, 13th December 1772, 12th February 1773, 15th January 1774, 14th May 1786)

Less than well paid the masters probably were, and looking for a pulpit some may have been, but the pattern I have described does not suggest that Bothkennar was a place to be avoided during William Nimmo's time.

So much then for the school and its masters. What of school life? The *Statistical Account* tells us that there were about 60 pupils at the school during this period, but what their exact ages were we cannot say. Since, however, it does tell us that the masters of Bothkennar were appointed to teach reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, Latin and Greek, and since we know that in general rural children at this time tended to spend only two to four years on the basics before leaving, it would seem likely that, apart from one or two pupils learning Latin and Greek, the pupils for the most part would be below twelve years of age, probably well below twelve. For the majority, most of the long school day would be spent in having the rudiments drilled into them, often by the assistance of

102 punishment that was considered both a useful means of controlling a large class of 60 pupils, and also an accepted means of preparing children for adult life here on earth and for eternal life hereafter. Although we no longer accept it, in Nimmo's day the belief was widespread that in all its elements — in management, in organisation, and in methods — education should be completely in accord with a Calvinistic interpretation of human destiny.

Since such drilling in the rudiments was a full-time job whose demands had to be reconciled with the needs of those few pupils studying Latin and Greek, the master in Bothkennar was sometimes allowed the assistance of a junior master, or doctor, who was responsible for English reading and writing. The Kirk Session, not the Heritors, paid him, and the records show fluctuating payments like £24 Scots per annum in 1727, £12 in 1736, and again £24 just before 1776, while the doctor appointed in that year could not be promised 'more than the session's circumstances would admit of', however worthy he was, and however many of a family he had to support. Throughout the period, the doctor was appointed only during the Session's pleasure — a very common arrangement (The Register 2nd September 1727, 17th October 1736, 22nd July 1776). Even when such a division of duties in the supervision of 60 children of many ages in one room could be paid for, their schooling must have been a physically cramped, emotionally desiccated, imaginatively limited kind of experience. The life of the school was teacher-centred, rule-bounded, highly disciplined, readily punished, based upon drill techniques and the encouragement of brief but correct answers. Influenced by the form and the certainty of the Catechism, there was no such thing in those days as a good wrong answer. It was a schoolroom experience that prepared children for the static society envisaged by the Reformers, a society in which the adults they were so soon to become were overseen by a Kirk Session that was devoted in a thoroughgoing Scottish way to the human potential for good. The experience of the schoolroom reflected the experience of 18th century adult life: it was hard; it was earnest; it was disciplined; it was closely related to an awareness of social possibility that was necessarily restricted by contemporary economic development, and to an awareness of human destiny that was almost equally restricted by the theology of the times. It was not competent to deal with social change; it was not designed to consider social change. And yet we are now aware that it was fundamental social change that was just over the horizon from Nimmo's time.

Everything that we know of school life in Bothkennar in Nimmo's day suggests that it did not foresee, and that it could not foresee, the vast economic, social and intellectual upheavals that were to stem

from the opening of Carron Iron Works in 1759, and from the beginning of mining soon afterwards in Bothkennar Parish itself. These developments produced changes in the number and distribution of population in the Parish: the traditional 500 to 600 souls became 821 in 1811, and 905 in 1831 (The New Statistical Account 1845). A new school costing £600 Sterling was built in 1830 to cope with the increase (*ibid*). These developments also produced changes in the way that the claims of a parish church were looked at, as the Reverend Mr Caw's references (*ibid*) to the absence of religious observance in local miners made clear

'Their wages are high, and the greater part is spent on the Saturday and Sabbath in public houses, which contributes exceedingly to make them inattentive to the ordinances of religion.'

They produced changes in social habits, so that a boatman or a barber going about his trade on Sundays could no longer be tried by the Session (The Register 12th February 1727, 20th December 1746, 15th September 1760, 14th and 21st August 1768). They eventually produced the changes in education that led to the School Board schools e.g. in Carron, Carronshore, and Larbert. These were schools that fitted into a system that was designed to train efficient workmen for a secular 19th century society rather than to prepare a moral flock to fit into the Godly Commonwealth envisaged by the 16th and 17th century Scottish Reformers; and these were schools that could at least begin to provide for the greater opportunities that the twentieth century has offered to the upward social mobility that Scottish academic talent has always seized upon — almost in an Old Testament way — as outward proof of high personal worth.

In retrospect, the period spanned by William Nimmo's ministry stands in education almost peacefully between the first great period of reformation that endeavoured to produce a system of parish schools in Scotland, and the beginnings of the dynamic, industrial, commercial, secular outlook that has produced the present. It stands between the first phase of a system designed to produce a Godly Commonwealth and the first phase of a system designed to produce an efficient industrialised state.

SOME POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS

Having said all this, what is one now to conclude about education in Bothkennar in Nimmo's time? I should like to make five simple points.

First, although by comparison this was a quiet, conservative period

Corrigendum

p102 line 32

F N H 5

The line commencing 'that was devoted . . . ' has lost a significant phrase and should continue ' . . . in a thoroughgoing Scottish way to the *eradication of human error rather than to the encouragement of the human potential for good*'.

104 in the history of education in Bothkennar, it was also a well-run period in which the Reformers' ideals were being maintained; if problems arose, then they were clearly met: they did not develop into any kind of breakdown of the accepted system; and there was evident in the Parish a habit of vigilance about what had been achieved by the Reformation, a vigilance that was expressed in the form of a warning in the Register of 5th January 1779 against the dangers of Jesuit education in the kingdom

'That indulgence granted to Popish Priests and Jesuits to keep Schools and take upon them the Education or Government of Youth in this Realm is too certain a method of tainting many of the rising generation with principles, not only opposite to the Simplicity of the Gospel, but pernicious to the Natural and Civil Interests of Mankind.'

Secondly, this desire to maintain the system can be seen to have been both expressed and working in so many ways. There was a schoolmaster's house years before its provision was required by law. Some of the Heritors voluntarily supplemented the basic legal salary of 100 merks. The Kirk Session regularly paid the master for poor scholars, and provided for an English doctor whenever this was financially possible. There was no need for adventure schools, or for any school other than the legal one. All of these suggest the efficient oversight of, and care for, education in an 18th century parish.

Thirdly, since we don't have any direct record of the pressure that was needed to maintain the inherited system of schooling in Bothkennar, we don't know to what extent William Nimmo himself was required to exert such pressure between 1765 and 1782. But to put the point rather negatively, had he been the kind of minister who did not care, or who did not exert vigilance in relation to what had been achieved, the results of his failure would certainly have been recorded — as they were in many another parish where the minister's supervision was lax. Although it was the presbytery that had the legal right to redress moral or academic misdemeanour, it was most often in fact the minister and the session that exerted close day-to-day supervision over both master and school. William Nimmo himself seems not always to have enjoyed good health, but the absence of recorded educational transgression suggests a close and careful sessional oversight in Bothkennar.

Fourthly, I don't feel that too much can be made of the point that Bothkennar did not foresee the future, that in Nimmo's time it merely went its own humdrum parochial way, unaware of the social and educational implications of industrial change. We have grown up in a century of change, and in a century that plans for change as something that is inevitable; but the social philosophy of the

post-Reformation period was fundamentally different: it was rather to avoid further change, since change was considered a falling away from the highest ideals of the Reformers. Both the ministers and the schoolmasters of those times — however able in other respects — were raised in such totally different habits of thought from our own about change in society.

Finally, and not unrelated to the previous point, it is fairly certain that William Nimmo would never have said, as was recorded of the Revered James Buchanan in the Register of the Presbytery of Dumbarton for July-August 1690, that

'it was not needful for the common people to learn to read and pray; it belonged only to the ministers and not the people, and that it was never good for the land since there were so many scholars in it.'

Had Nimmo been of that mind, education in Bothkennar in his times would not have maintained the standards, and the knowledge, and the habits of industrious application and honesty that, as T. C. Smout so rightly says, at least prepared Scotsmen in some measure for the future — prepared them to take advantage of the ethic of their Protestant Reformation background in adapting very quickly to the new demands of an industrialised and commercialised age when it did come.

So it may be said, in conclusion, that the years of Nimmo's ministry from 1765 until 1782 were a quiet time in the educational history of Bothkennar, a period between two events of much greater social and educational import. Yet they constituted also a period essential to the maintenance of the highest achievements of one event, and were not entirely lacking in unconscious preparation for the other. Nimmo's times in the history of education in Bothkennar were true to the only criteria that those times knew, and they kept faith with the best of the past as they understood it. One cannot ask for very much more.