
Alexander Law
BOOK REVIEWS


This is a serious study of the religious element in Scottish school-books at two important periods in the 19th century, one of them before the passing of the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872, and the other after that date. 1872 is a significant date because the Education Code of that year removed religious instruction from the list of activities for which parliamentary grants could be made in Scotland. Miss Alwall says: "The question presents itself: What intellectual nourishment was offered the pupils of the Scottish parochial schools and the like? Was there a change in the vein in which the schoolbooks were written between the eighteen-fifties and the beginning of the eighteen-eighties? A comparison of the religious contents of these publications before and after the 1872 Code seemed to be one way of answering the question". To answer the question Miss Alwall set herself to analyse the contents of 16 primers and 53 readers produced by the well-known Scottish firms of Blackie and Son; W. and R. Chambers; W. Collins, Sons and Company; T. Nelson and Sons; Oliver and Boyd; and the Scottish School-Book Association.

Since her purpose was to compare the products of the two periods, Miss Alwall was at some trouble to select areas of study that are similar. This naturally limited the scope of her enquiry, and finally as regards prose items she restricted herself to matter-of-fact descriptions on subjects like air, animals, coal, heavenly bodies, vegetables, water, wind, and religious instruction. For poetry, the selection had to be even more limited, consisting of a study of Oliver and Boyd's "Course" of 1855 and the same firm's "Series" of 1882. On such a small sample the conclusions as regards poetry are scarcely reliable, but this is no fault of Miss Alwall's, but reflects the paucity of available material.

Miss Alwall divides the content of her material into three sections, religious (R), non-religious (NR), and religious instruction (Rel.
Instr.). The first and last of these sections are fairly obvious, but in defining "non-religious", she had to look carefully at the context in which words like divine, Heaven, and Zion were used, and make a judgment.

On this basis the textbooks are analysed in some detail in pages 62-132. A summary of the results, in Chapter VIII, lists that in the earlier period (1850-61), of the 324 prose sections studied, 38% were non-religious, 28% religious, and 34% religious instruction; and in the later (1873-82) period, of 248 sections, 63% were non-religious, 20% religious, and 17% religious instruction. The study of poems revealed a similar trend, from 57% non-religious in the earlier to 76% in the later period. Both studies together showed the interesting final figures of (1) in the earlier period 44% non-religious, 33% religious and 23% religious instruction, and (2) in the later period 71% non-religious, 22% religious and 7% religious instruction.

To the student of educational history, and in particular of Scottish history, Miss Alwall's careful study poses problems in relation to the religious, political, and economic history of the country, and here, it must be admitted, she leaves most of the questions unanswered. The general outline of Scottish education with which she prefaces her work is disappointing in that it is based on traditional secondary authorities, and ignores the modern studies based on original research by writers like James Craigie, D. J. Withrington, J. D. Myers, and John Stocks, and the articles in Scottish Educational Studies, Vol. 4, No. 2, of November 1972—which, however, appeared after Miss Alwall had completed her work. Some of her quotations from earlier authors are suspect, like that from I. J. Simpson's Education in Aberdeenshire, to the effect that if girls were allowed to write, this might encourage them to write love-letters. This is clearly a typical rural joke, and the facts of town and country contradict it. There are subtleties on the side of the churches that Miss Alwall—perhaps fortunately for herself—does not recognise. The United Presbyterian church, for instance, a powerful polemical and social force, spoke strongly from 1847 until it modified its views in 1869 against religious instruction in the national schools, an attitude reflecting not merely opposition to the Church of Scotland, but widespread radical political views. To understand the inter-denominational quarrels of the Scottish 19th century churches is perhaps asking too much of one who is not a native, and it is only fair to add that Miss Alwall, confining herself to one area alone, has produced an objective assessment of schoolbooks that no Scottish writer has yet tackled.
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She breaks new ground with brief histories of the publishing firms concerned, noting the scientific and moral interests of the Chambers brothers, and the Free Church associations of Collins. The archives of Chambers, Blackie, and the Scottish School-Book Association are still complete, and indicate "that the Code of 1872 vastly influenced the Publishers and caused re-writing of their school-books". There is even a letter from Gladstone to Blackies as late as 1894 complaining about the lack of solemnity in one of their series, and concluding that "great care will be required to avoid anything which can be called polemical".

The broad question she asks about the intellectual nourishment offered to Scottish pupils at that time is only partly answered, and I should like to add a little to it from an account in my possession by a lady who was at a Scottish primary school from 1880 and wrote as follows about Nelson’s Royal Reader V, one of Miss Alwall’s tests: "In Standard V we reached the highest peak of school book—Nelson’s Royal Reader No. V. It cost the colossal sum of 2 shillings—but it was impressed on us with true Victorian thrift that it had to do us for two years. What a splendid book it was and how many ‘casements’ did it open. We sailed up the Amazon, climbed the Andes, and marvelled at the Vision of Mirza. The spelling was difficult. We now read the poems in class—quotations from The Deserted Village, Gray’s Elegy, ‘There was a sound of revelry by night’ and ‘Roll on thou deep and dark blue ocean roll’. It looks as if at least some of the publishers succeeded in stimulating the imagination.

This study bears all the marks of academic presentation, and many readers will find the apparatus of detailed definitions, cross references, sub-divisions, tables, and diagrams rather off-putting. The bibliography is useful. The book is, however, fair in its approach and honest in its assessment, and shows that a study of schoolbooks can be an important element in the study of Scottish education. The textbooks on arithmetic, history, geography, and the elementary approach to science would now merit attention.

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