

## GENDER AND GEOGRAPHY: THE SCHOOLING OF POOR GIRLS IN THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY SCOTLAND

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The pioneering collection of essays, *Girls in their Prime: Scottish Education Revisited* (1990), included a mixture of historical and contemporary studies which together made necessary a revision of the Scottish educational tradition. It challenged the comfortable stereotypes of the 'democratic intellect', which focused on the poor talented boy (the 'lad of parts') and the university-educated schoolmaster (the 'dominie') who dedicated himself to the enlightenment of the nation. The editors, Fiona Paterson and Judith Fewell, pointed to the patriarchal nature of the democratic intellect, and argued that the pressure of Victorian beliefs ensured that the ideal of female domesticity was 'implicated in the gendering of education in Scotland, just as [it was] in England and Wales'.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the editors of *Girls in their Prime* saw the tradition of co-education as discriminating against women, identifying a strong strain of machismo in Scottish culture which permeated the educational ideal.<sup>2</sup> Education was, and is, seen as integral to Scottish distinctiveness, and, whatever the reality, the parish school before the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act was believed to develop a common culture for the whole population, whose roots might be traced ideologically to the Reformation of the sixteenth century, and spatially to the Lowlands.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while the Scottish educational tradition was essentially a masculine ideal, it was also a Lowland and Presbyterian construct. Whereas *Girls in their Prime* revealed the gender-blindness of the educational myth, and the gender inequality of educational practice, they neglected different regional experiences of female education, notably of the Highlands and Islands. This paper examines the experience of working-class girls in that region during the nineteenth century to assess the validity of the general conclusions advanced by Paterson and Fewell.

As they note, Scottish records seem as gender-blind as the educational tradition itself. There is most difficulty for the pre 1872 period, for though numerous observers gathered material on the subjects studied by schoolchildren, they rarely distinguished between the sexes. For the second half of the century, there is some evidence in HMI reports, Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education, government inquiries, school board minutes and school logs, but in general, these sources too are gender-blind. However, a detailed reading of school logs in particular reveals the gender inequality imposed by both the national tradition and government legislation as mediated by the peculiarities, notably economic and geographic, of the Highlands and Islands.

1 F. Paterson & J. Fewell (eds), *Girls in their Prime: Scottish education revisited*, Edinburgh, 1990, p. 14.

2 Paterson & Fewell, p. 3.

3 See R.D. Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People 1750-1918*, Oxford, 1995; H.M. Knox, *Two Hundred and Fifty Years of Scottish Education, 1696-1946*, Edinburgh, 1953; J. Scotland, *The History of Scottish Education*, 2 vols, London, 1969.

This paper concentrates on the education of working-class girls in parish, charity and, after the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act, Board (or public) schools. It does not consider schools which remained outside the mainstream of education, such as ragged, reformatory and industrial schools. Studies of these, however, generally support the conclusions of *Girls in their Prime*, revealing similar patriarchal attitudes to gender in general and the curriculum in particular, though the latter was more restricted than in Board schools.<sup>4</sup> Nor have Sunday schools been considered, but here too there are interesting parallels with day schools in the impact on provision (which increased) of splits in the Church of Scotland in the 1840s, and in the feminisation of Sunday-school teaching, from a majority of males in the 1850s to a majority of females in the 1890s.<sup>5</sup>

Both the British government and the Church of Scotland regarded education as a key factor in 'civilising' the Highlands and Islands. Calvinism stressed the need for universal education, regardless of class or sex, though the talented poor boy was privileged in that his social origins were not to deny him access to University. From these lads of parts would come the schoolmasters of the future. The Act of 1696 prescribing a school in every parish, however, was never entirely effective. In particular, the geography of the Highlands and Islands, as well as the widespread, endemic poverty and the widely scattered population, meant that the Lowland style of parish school was often not appropriate. Thus, while pride in the national system of education was reflected in the first *Statistical Account of Scotland*, compiled by Sir John Sinclair from the returns of parish ministers between 1791 and 1799, those for the Highlands and Islands revealed considerable anxiety over the state of formal education.<sup>6</sup> In particular, serious concern over the neglect of girls' schooling was expressed.<sup>7</sup> Whereas in rural parishes throughout Scotland, boys as well as girls could find employment from the age of eight or nine, family need for child labour appears to have affected school attendance of girls more than boys in the Highlands and Islands.<sup>8</sup> In a tour of the Hebrides in the 1760s, the Rev. John Walker had found a school established by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge [SSPCK] which contained 39 boys but only six girls. He commented:

The great difference between the children of the two sexes is very remarkable; but the same is the case all over the Highlands. Wherever there is access to a school, boys are carefully put to it; but the Parents consider learning of any

4 See, e.g., A. Gavin, 'The Origins, Emergence and Development of "Ragged Schools" in Scotland in the Nineteenth Century', M.Ed. Dissertation, Stirling University, 1992; A.G. Ralston, 'The Treatment of Delinquent Children in Scotland, 1812-1872, with Special Reference to Industrial and Reformatory Schools', D.Phil., Oxford University, 1982; A.G. Ralston, 'The Development of Reformatory and Industrial Schools in Scotland, 1832-1872', *Scottish Economic and Social History*, vol. 7, 1987.

5 C.G. Brown, 'The Sunday-School Movement in Scotland, 1780-1914', *Scottish Church History Society Records*, 1981-83, vol. 21.

6 J. Sinclair, *The Statistical Account of Scotland (1791-99)*, gen. eds D.J. Withrington & I.R. Grant, 20 vols, Wakefield, 1983.

7 See, e.g., Sinclair, vol. 8, p. 371, vol. 12, p. 71.

8 See, e.g., Sinclair, vol. 13, p. 670, vol. 17, pp. 1, 237.

kind as of little Moment to the Girls, on which Account great Numbers of them never go to any school.<sup>9</sup>

This was in line with the general experience of the SSPCK.<sup>10</sup> Since the early eighteenth century, the Society had been charged by the Church of Scotland with erecting schools and supplying teachers, to make up for the failings of the parish system in the Highlands and Islands. By the 1840s and the second, or *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, there seems to have been an increase in the numbers both of female schools outside the national system where the main purpose was to teach sewing, and either sewing mistresses or schoolmistresses employed in parish schools. Besides sewing, the latter also assisted the dominie by teaching the 'ordinary branches of education' to infant boys and girls.<sup>11</sup>

The issue of child labour continued to have an adverse effect on school attendance and enrolment throughout the half century between the two statistical accounts; but by the second, it was reported that parents attempted various strategies to ensure that their children got at least basic literacy. These included alternating siblings between school and work, having a young adult (male or female) who had some education give lessons to the children of a few families in one of their homes, or sending children to adventure schools.<sup>12</sup> Still, as in the 1790s so in the 1840s, girls were less likely to attend school, or to attend as frequently and at such length, as boys, though in particular communities, such as fishing, the difference seems relative. Hence the *New Statistical Account of Scotland* lamented the insufficient attention to children's schooling paid in one parish in Skye, which was said to be representative: 'there are not a few parents who are indifferent to the education of their male children, and consider it entirely superfluous for females'.<sup>13</sup> more than in the Lowlands, girls attended school for a shorter time on average than boys. For example, in the parish of Kilmuir (on Skye) it was regretted that 'many people foolishly imagine that their girls have but little need of education in comparison with their boys, and consequently the proportion of the former who attend is comparatively small'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, between 1796 and 1821, boys had consistently outnumbered girls by at least two to one in the SSPCK schools. By then, additional charitable societies, for example the schools of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the Edinburgh Gaelic School Society [EGSS], sought to plug the educational gaps in the Highlands and Islands. The former reported in 1837 that girls were usually withdrawn once they had acquired the ability to write and were reading in English and Gaelic. In contrast, the EGSS, which taught only Gaelic literacy, attracted a far higher proportion of

9 Cited in Sinclair, vol. 20, p. xxxvi.

10 D. Withrington, 'The SSPCK and Highland Schools in Mid Eighteenth Century', *Scottish Historical Review*, vol. 41, no. 132, 1962.

11 See, e.g., *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, Edinburgh & London, 1845, vol. 13, p. 106.

12 See, e.g., *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. 14, pp. 313, 329; vol. 15, p. 22.

13 *The Statistical Account of Scotland* (1983 ed.), vol. 13, p. 413.

14 *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. 14, p. 282.

female scholars than attended the parochial, SSPCK and General Assembly schools.<sup>15</sup> Since parents considered that daughters as much as sons would benefit from being able to read the Gaelic Bible, there was equality of attendance at the EGSS schools. General Assembly schools differed from those of the Gaelic Society in having a much less equitable ratio between male and female scholars which, though not as marked a bias towards males as in the SSPCK schools, was never as balanced as the sex ratio in the Gaelic schools.<sup>16</sup> Thus, more girls in the Highlands and Islands, where often the parish school was for boys, were taught outside the national system.<sup>17</sup> In the charity schools, moreover, if any of the more advanced branches were taught, they were the preserve of the boys.

Hence, while the region as a whole certainly did not constitute an educational desert, female schooling was particularly neglected in the western Highlands and the Hebrides.<sup>18</sup> Where there was provision, it was often outside of the parochial system. For example, the SSPCK records for July 1868 reveal that in Inch, the younger girls from the local master's school attended the female school for one hour a day, and the bigger girls for the whole day, receiving industrial instruction only, and then chiefly in the winter. It seems that the elder girls were not satisfied with such a restricted curriculum, preferring to receive instruction in the 'more elementary branch' of literature in the master's school.<sup>19</sup> The situation was already changing, however: by the 1860s teaching females writing and arithmetic even in Gaelic schools was seen as worthwhile, implying that they could now make more use of these skills.<sup>20</sup> Girls themselves seemed increasingly eager to gain an education:

It is lamentable to see poor girls under the necessity of expending the earnings of one term, at a period of life when they become almost ashamed to confess their ignorance, in boarding themselves at Inverness, as long as they can during the next, in order to possess those common qualifications with which others more favourably situated begin service.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the second *Statistical Account of Scotland* had noted the spread of, and increased interest in, education for girls, though still mainly outside of the national system of parish schools.

Both statistical accounts reveal that Calvinism and Lowland culture saw education as a means of raising the Highlands and Islands above their assumed barbarism. However, it was not the state of education in the Highlands which led to the establishment of the Argyll Commission in 1864 to investigate the schools of Scotland.

15 V.E. Durkacz, *The Decline of the Celtic Languages*, Edinburgh, 1983, pp. 124-25.

16 C.W. Withers, *Gaelic Scotland*, London, 1988, p. 158.

17 *The Statistical Account of Scotland* (1983 ed.), vol. 12, p. xxxiii.

18 D. Withington, 'Schooling, Literacy and Society' in T.M. Devine & Rosalind Mitchison (eds), *People and Society in Scotland Volume 1, 1760-1830*, Edinburgh, 1988.

19 Scottish Record Office [SRO], GD95/9/10, SSPCK Inspectors' Reports for 1868-69, p. 114.

20 Durkacz, p. 125.

21 *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. 14, p. 413.

Rather, that was prompted by concern over the state of education in the Lowlands. The fear was that the impact of industrialisation during the half century between the two statistical accounts had been to undermine the ideal of a school in every parish serving all classes and both sexes, resulting in a 'half-educated nation' in the Lowlands.<sup>22</sup>

The Argyll Commission saw three great divisions of population: the Lowland parishes, the large industrial towns, and the Highlands. In the first, the parochial system was believed to be still fully operational; in the second, it was held to have ceased to cope; and in the last, it was considered to be severely restricted. The *Aberdeen Journal* argued that the deficiencies in the parochial system were not nationwide, but pertained to large manufacturing cities and towns which had experienced a great increase in population, and also to Highland parishes which covered huge tracts of land.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the Argyll Commission based its conclusion, which informed the 1872 Education Act, that Scotland was much further behind in education than people assumed, largely on the situation in Glasgow. The largest industrial city and the 'second city of the empire', responsible for a fifth of children of school age in the country, Glasgow was hardly typical of Scotland.<sup>24</sup>

The Assistant Commissioner who reported on the Hebrides was a young advocate based in Edinburgh, Alexander Nicolson, himself a Gaelic-speaking native of Skye. He noted in 1867 that, in those parts of the Highlands and Islands where younger men and women went in the summer to the east-coast and the Lothians for work, they left 'home operations' to be performed by the older people and the young.<sup>25</sup> There was a lack of job opportunities for women in the region, apart from domestic service and seasonal employment in the fields and on the shore. In both, there were more chances of work in the Lowlands. Nicolson reported that from Skye – where unusually, he observed, women were expected to do out-door work such as hauling peat and seaweed which in more prosperous districts would be performed by horses – there was annual migration in summer of the able-bodied of both sexes to the Lothians, in search of field work. Nicolson noted that it was the men who tended to go also to the East Coast of Scotland, and to the coast of Northern Ireland, for work in the fishing industry, but within 20 years seasonal migration of women following the herring outnumbered men. Nicolson judged Skye, with its considerable labour surplus, to have been particularly poor, reflected in the low levels of literacy. He gave figures comparing it to Tiree, where the proportion of women above 16 years of age unable to read, though much larger than that of men, was small compared to the Isle of Skye.

22 [George Lewis], *Scotland A Half Educated Nation, both in the Quantity and Quality of her Educational Institutions*, Glasgow, 1834; *Aberdeen Journal*, 15 May 1867.

23 See, e.g., I. Mavor, *Glasgow*, Edinburgh, 2000. For the main provisions of the Education (Scotland) Act, 1872, see Mayer, pp. 313-14. Cf. A.C. Sellar, *Manual of the Education Act for Scotland*, Edinburgh & London, 1872; D. Withrington, 'The 1872 Education Act – A Centenary Retrospect', *Education in the North*, 1972, vol. 9.

24 Education Commission (Scotland), *Report on the State of Education in the Hebrides*, Alexander Nicolson, M.A., Advocate, Edinburgh, 1866, [3845-IV], 25, p. 92.

25 Education Commission, pp. 52, 62.

	Skye		Tiree	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Persons enumerated	2863	3349	914	993
Can Read	1973	1376	683	574
Cannot Read	890	1973	230	419
Read English & Gaelic	1653	713	560	392
Read Gaelic Only	320	663	38	97
Can Write	1366	415	575	348
Persons enumerated	1497	2934	839	635

Literacy Rates in Skye and Tiree for Men and Women over 16 Years of Age, 1866

Source: Education Commission (Scotland), *Report on the State of Education in the Hebrides*, 1866, pp. 55, 62

In addition, for Skye, Nicolson recorded that of the 1973 men who could read, 1096 could do so fluently, and 877 with difficulty; the corresponding figures for the 1376 females were 665, and 711.<sup>26</sup> Nicolson also reported that in Lewis, while women could read Gaelic, few could read English; and few women could write in either language. Despite all the efforts of various societies, so few of the population were able to read English:

as to indicate that all the educational power put forth up to a comparatively recent period, has, with the exception of the agency of the Gaelic schools, been of trifling effect, and most specifically and painfully so in respect to the female sex.<sup>27</sup>

Nicolson wrote in a footnote that women in Lewis may have had little use for the art of writing; however, the lack of such a skill served to make them conservative, resistant to change and, by implication, a drag on progress. The Registrar-General's returns had revealed that the percentage of signatures by mark in the marriage registers of the Hebrides in 1862 was 47.6 for men, and 64.8 for women. As Nicolson pointed out, of 376 couples nearly half of the men and two-thirds of the women were unable to write their names. He contrasted those figures with Edinburgh, where the percentage was only 4.33 for men, and 8.75 for women.<sup>28</sup> Nicolson saw the power of reading and writing in English as a force for developing what he identified as a backward society. He also pointed out that skills in elementary arithmetic would make the women less vulnerable to fraud and overcharging by shopkeepers, during the frequent, long absences of husbands, sons and brothers. Moreover, being able to write would enable the women to communicate with their absent men directly and intimately, instead of having to rely on a go-between. The education of women on Lewis was, Nicolson charged, particularly neglected: of 2697 scholars on the rolls at the time of his visit, there were 1590 boys and only 1107 girls; in attendance, 922 boys and 684 girls. Yet the female population of the

26 Education Commission, pp. 13-14.

27 Education Commission, p. 122.

28 Education Commission, p. 21.

island was in excess of the male in 1861 by 1122 – the numbers being respectively 11,089 and 9967.<sup>29</sup> Nicolson identified the main reason for this gender gap in attendance as the fact that girls were more useful at home for work 'within doors as without'. As a result, there was 'less scruple in withholding a girl from school than a boy, because learning is not considered so important in her case'.<sup>30</sup>

Yet in spite of such educational deprivation, Nicolson caught sight of an occasional lass of parts. Thus, he reported that on North Uist 'in a thatched cottage near Balranald, I saw a considerable row of prizes, and almost all first prizes, carried off a few weeks before from the Free Church Normal School in Edinburgh, by a daughter of the house, a girl of about 17'.<sup>31</sup> Though this example was relegated to a footnote, the impression from Nicolson's report is that there were potentially enough talented girls to solve the teacher shortage, if carefully nurtured. Female teachers, mostly untrained and outside the national school system, were relatively common in the Highlands by the 1860s. This was generally for reasons of cost, but was also due to the difficulty and expense in enticing male graduates to teach the '3Rs' in poor parishes which covered enormous areas, far from urban civilisation. The assumption of the educational tradition had always been that university educated men would be teachers.<sup>32</sup> Since elementary education was deemed sufficient for a population which had a long way to go in order to 'catch up' with the Lowland ideal of educational meritocracy, Nicolson argued that parish schools run by women would often be superior to those presided over by a man:

If qualified by preliminary Normal-School training, without which they might be considered more helpless than men to conduct a school properly so-called, [female teachers] would be perfectly adequate to take charge of boys as well as girls, while they would import special instruction to pupils of their own sex in sewing and other female work. That competent schoolmistresses are able to manage even big boys, as well as girls, I have seen more than one example in the district [Tiree]. This may not be the case everywhere, but Highland boys are usually not disposed to rudeness or insubordination.<sup>33</sup>

By the time he reported, the SSPCK had also concluded that a trained mistress would be an improvement on an untrained master in the Highlands.<sup>34</sup>

The 1872 Act which followed the Argyll Commission had particular effects on female education by the end of the century, including improvements in female literacy, reflected in the following table:

29 Education Commission, p. 21.

30 Education Commission, p. 101.

31 Education Commission, p. 37, note 1.

32 See H. Corr, 'Teachers and Gender: debating the myths of equal opportunities in Scottish education 1800-1914', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, no. 3, 1997.

33 *Report on the State of Education in the Hebrides*, p. 110.

34 SRO, GD95/9/9, SSPCK Records, Reports of Visits to Schools, 1867, p. 14.

	1872		1882	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Scotland	10.44	20.52	7.00	13.90
Northern District (Orkney, Shetland, Caithness, Sutherland)	6.12	11.75	3.62	10.14
North Western District (Inverness, Ross & Cromarty)	27.83	46.67	21.73	32.57
North Eastern District (Nairn, Elgin, Banff, Aberdeen, Kincardine)	2.70	7.64	1.04	5.12
East Midland District (Forfar, Perth, Fife, Kinross, Clackmannan)	5.50	13.75	3.59	9.36
West Midland District (Stirling, Dumbarton, Argyll, Bute)	9.43	18.99	8.92	13.06
South Western District (Renfrew, Ayr, Lanark)	15.23	29.61	10.45	20.18
South Eastern District (Lothians, Berwick, Peebles, Selkirk)	5.86	9.97	3.23	5.68
Southern District (Dumfries, Kirkeudbright, Wigton)	4.37	5.99	2.80	5.12

Percentage of men and women who signed the marriage registers by mark  
Source: *The Napier Commission*, Edinburgh, 1884, p. 69

The improvement was not uniform, with the Highlands still lagging behind; but that gap was to decrease in the later nineteenth century. Nicolson had favoured the use of Gaelic in the early stages of education as a means to improve the knowledge of English, but the 1872 Act made no provision for Gaelic in the curriculum, which disadvantaged females.<sup>35</sup> At the time of the Act, one reason for favouring boys in terms of English schooling was that their education was potentially of more financial benefit to the family, since males earned more than females, and had more opportunity both for skilled work and for migration. Nevertheless, women played a crucial role in the nineteenth-century Highland economy. Indeed, despite the sexual division of labour in crofting communities, the home and its vicinity formed the working environment for both females and males.<sup>36</sup>

In *The Making of the Crofting Community*, James Hunter argues that the crofting system was designed not to be self-sufficient but to create a virtually unlimited supply of cheap labour, for the kelp and fishing industries. He portrays the crofter as a man with a family.<sup>37</sup> Highland school logs confirm that the crofting system was above all a family system, dependent for its survival on the labour of wives and children, older daughters especially. It is clear that the father's work alone was insufficient to support the family, and that women did field and shore work as well as run the home. The Argyll Commission reported that in the agricultural districts, both Lowland and Highland, boys from ten years old and upward could earn 20 to 40 shillings, with their food, for half the year, and that girls had to stay at home to take care of the house and

35 *Report on the State of Education in the Hebrides*, p. 193, table xiii.

36 C. Lodge, 'The Clearers and the Cleared: Women, Economy and Land in the Scottish Highlands 1800-1900', Ph.D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1996, pp. 168, 300; I.J.M. Robertson, 'The role of women in social protest in the Highlands of Scotland, c.1880-1939', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1997.

37 J. Hunter, *The Making of a Crofting Community*, Edinburgh, 1976, pp. 3-31.



their younger siblings so that their mothers could engage in field work.<sup>38</sup> This underestimated the field work done by older girls, and the importance of the family croft to the Highland economy.

The damaging effect prolonged absences had on the school as a whole was a cause of concern for teachers. There was a particular fear that the wives of labouring men worked out of doors so much that they could not possibly attend to the home education of their daughters. Indeed, it was claimed that it was the mothers, rather than fathers, who decided on school attendance. This remained the case even at the end of the century. As the teacher at Breakish School on Skye was told in July 1896, the mothers 'compel their children to stay at home, often against the fathers' wish, while they go out to work'.<sup>39</sup> The logs show, however, that the sexual division of labour placed more demands on girls than on boys. Both were expected to contribute wages to the family income and labour to the croft, but generally it was girls who were recorded absent because of a mother's ill-health and, more often, to help with the housework.<sup>40</sup> If there were no elder sisters, boys were kept from school for domestic reasons, though they were rarely recorded as doing 'home work'.

The 1872 Education Act made attendance at school compulsory. School Boards in the Highlands and Islands, however, do not seem to have pursued defaulters vigorously. Minutes of School Boards in Sutherland and Argyll, for example, record persistently low and irregular attendance.<sup>41</sup> School logs show that there appears to have been a rough division of labour by gender and age. Thus, older boys were more likely than girls to be noted as absent due to work with peat or driving cattle.<sup>42</sup> However, the teacher at Eskdale Roman Catholic School in Argyllshire recorded the absence of the older girls in May 1895, due to their herding cows, and though most logs noted that the 'stronger children' worked the peat, some recorded specifically that the older girls did so.<sup>43</sup> Even younger children, not yet strong enough for work on the family croft, would be kept at home if their parents found them 'sufficiently useful in spreading peats'.<sup>44</sup>

It was common for log books to report relatively better attendance by boys than girls. Thus it was recorded at one school in Portree on 30 July 1880, that the total number of attendances for 3-7 year olds was 3479, of which boys made up 2253, girls 1226; the total number of attendances for pupils over 7 years of age was 10408, of which boys constituted

38 Education Commission (Scotland) *Report on the State of Education in the Country Districts of Scotland*, A.C. Sellar & Lieut.-Col. C.F. Maxwell, Edinburgh, 1866, [3845-III] 25. 509, p. 19.

39 Highland Council Archives [HCA], CI5/3/15b Breakish Public School Log, 17 July 1896.

40 See, e.g., HCA/CI5/3/14a Braes Public School Log, 30 December 1898; HCA/CI5/3/15a Breakish Public School Log, 24 January 1879, 6 July 1883, 11 May 1888.

41 E.g., HCA/CS/5/3/8/1 Kildonan School Board Minutes entry for 18 December 1892. See also HCA/CA5/3/79 Glen Etive school Log, 7 July 1879, 16 December 1881, 18 January 1884, 5 December 1884, 2 March 1888.

42 E.g., HCA/CI5/3/69 Aird School Log, 18 July 1891, 17 August 1892, 11 August 1893.

43 HCA/CI5/3/39b Eskdale R.C. School Log, 17 May 1895. For girls at the peat, see, e.g., HCA/CI5/3/34a Duisdale School Log, 17 May 1895.

44 HCA/CA5/3/16a Strontian School Log, 26 September 1879.

6623 and girls 3785.<sup>45</sup> There was a similar pattern across the region.<sup>46</sup> When the opposite situation occurred, it was considered unusual enough to be commented upon. As the teacher at a school in Inverness-shire wrote in June 1881: 'The number of attendances made by boys is this week less than that made by girls. In no other instance has this been the case for the last five years'.<sup>47</sup> Boys' absences also attracted more comment, even when their average attendance exceeded that of girls. For example at Duisdale Public School in the county of Inverness, the teacher noted in April 1900 that 'the greater part of the senior boys are kept at home for work at sea-weed'. Yet the boys' average attendance was 26.9 whereas that of the girls, on whom no comment was made, was 13.4.<sup>48</sup> Still, that might indicate an improvement, since another Inverness-shire headmaster commented nearly a quarter of a century earlier: 'parents are in general uneducated themselves and they do not consider that there is any use whatever in educating the females, and the consequence is that they are kept but a very short time at school if sent at all'.<sup>49</sup> In practice, parents who depended on older children to help in the home were more likely to return their sons to school when possible, but to withdraw daughters completely. However, the fact that children, and especially boys, attended when not needed in the fields, showed that parents placed some value on schooling.

Generally, the winter months from December (that is, after the potatoes have been lifted) were a time when children attended school more regularly, since they were not needed in the fields until March. Throughout the Highlands and Islands, however, winter brought other obstacles to regular attendance: inadequate clothing, long distances from school and, most notably, the weather, with snowfalls often making travel to school impossible. In addition, there was the lack of daylight, limiting the hours children who lived at a distance could spend in school. It also affected what was taught, putting constraints on sewing. At the same time, while sewing was seen as a quintessentially female subject, and the grant was accorded only for girls who completed the course of instruction, sometimes sewing and knitting were taught to both boys and girls. This was related to local employment opportunities for boys as well as girls, but more often it was because the school had only one teacher, generally a female.

In spite of all these obstacles, the Napier Commission of Inquiry into the condition of the crofters and cottars in the Highlands and Islands in the early 1880s showed that, since the 1872 Act, there had been progress in Highland education for girls as well as boys. It also, however, confirmed that generally adult women still had the poorest education. Thus, it noted that in the Hebrides the education of the adult population, and of women in particular, had advanced little:

45 HCA/CI5/3/69a Macdiarmid School Log, 30 July 1880.

46 E.g., HCA/CI5/3/84a Torran Public School Log, 3 June 1887.

47 HCA/CI5/3/123a Invermoriston Public School Log, 17 June 1881.

48 HCA/CI5/3/34a Duisdale Public School Log, 6 April 1900.

49 HCA/CI5/3/57a Heast School Log, 20 July 1877.

the percentage of men in the Hebrides that signed their names by mark in the marriage registers in 1862 was 47.6 and of women 64.8. In 1882 the male percentage had fallen to 32.6, the female percentage only to 61.2.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, more boys than girls were offered opportunities for secondary and post-secondary education, related to employment opportunities, which continued to be more restricted for girls. One exit for girls from the croft, which required more than basic schooling, was to become a lass of parts, by taking the route of pupil teacher and then training as a teacher. Indeed, the Napier Commissioners echoed Nicolson's belief that it was desirable that:

the number of female teachers in the Highlands and Islands should be increased, whether as sole teachers or assistants. They are generally not less successful than male teachers, up to the measure of their qualifications; they can teach branches of which men can know nothing, but which are of great practical importance; they cost less; and they contribute a little more of those civilising influences which women exert, and which cannot be estimated by arithmetic.<sup>51</sup>

However, if the teacher was male, a sewing mistress was required. Often, the dominie employed his wife or sister, which reflected a long-standing dependence on family partnerships to staff small schools in poorer and remote rural areas even after the 1872 Education Act. Of course, as noted above, the female teacher in sole charge of a school was expected to teach sewing on top of the 'ordinary' branches of the curriculum. This would seriously hamper her ability to introduce higher subjects, making it difficult for a lass of parts to emerge. A lass, however, might aspire to follow the path of her mistress, by becoming a pupil teacher.

Despite the school's dependence on the sewing grant, lessons were only acceptable if they were seen to be of practical use to the older girls. Indeed, cases of resistance were frequently recorded. In 1881, the School Board of the Parish of Ardersier in the county of Inverness noted that, in the previous quarter, there had never been more than 20 out of 56 on the roll who attended, and while there had been considerable improvement in the current quarter, with attendance almost doubling, there was still parental opposition to sewing. The schoolmaster argued that, when faced with notes from parents forbidding their daughters to attend the sewing class, there was little he could do.<sup>52</sup> Such opposition was encountered throughout the Highlands.<sup>53</sup> Even where the

50 *Report of Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry Into the Condition of the Crofters and Cottars on the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1884, pp. 67-68.

51 *Report of Her Majesty's Commissioners*, pp. 76-77.

52 HCA/CI5/9/1 School Board of the Parish of Ardersier Minute Book, 25 January 1881.

53 For Argyllshire, HCA/CA5/3/16a Strontian Public School Log, 13 January, 8 February, 12 December 1876; for Inverness-shire HCA/CI5/3/2 Abernethy School Log, 12 June 1871, 30 June 1877, 8 February 1878, 20 February 1888.

work was done, it was not always made available for inspection. Thus at Dingwall, in Ross and Cromarty, the headmaster was directed in January 1886:

to insist on the pupils giving up their work to the Sewing Mistress until after the annual inspection. Several parents have insisted on the contrary that the work done by the children is private property, and that as such they are entitled to the use of it when finished.<sup>54</sup>

Certainly, there were frequent complaints from HMIs about the lack of specimens and the backwardness in needlework, and that knitting, which did not receive a grant, was encouraged.<sup>55</sup> The parental preference for knitting implies that it was still regarded as of use – more so than sewing – to the family, even if knitted goods no longer attracted the high rate of women's wages which they had done in the late eighteenth century.<sup>56</sup> The situation was similar in the few Catholic schools in the Highlands, where there was a combination of parental resistance and poverty: 'Parents in most cases persistently decline to furnish work for girls, especially little ones'.<sup>57</sup>

Paterson and Fewell saw co-education, which seems to have been the norm in the Highlands, as favouring boys. Helen Corr agrees, though her focus is on teachers.<sup>58</sup> However, because there were fewer resources in the Highlands and Islands, there was perforce less emphasis on domestic subjects than in the more urbanised Lowlands. Highland schools were not always able to accommodate sewing. Ironically, if the school was run by a woman, she had to ensure that sewing did not interfere with the rest of the curriculum, for example by teaching it during playtime, a practice which the Assynt School Board in Sutherland county warned against in 1873.<sup>59</sup> Some teachers, both male and female, balked at the way in which sewing interrupted the other subjects of the curriculum, especially as girls would often spend a day sewing because their irregular attendance meant that they had not completed the schedule for a grant. Moreover, some arrangements made to suit the sewing teacher were clearly experienced as disruptive by the dominie.

Like sewing, cookery was experienced as another expensive interference in the ordinary work of the school. In practice, however, cookery was taught in very few schools in the Highlands, and for the most part only in urban centres, such as Inverness or Fort William, and only at the very end of the century. Newspapers show that middle-class women tried to compensate for the lack of cookery facilities in schools by arranging for a

54 HCA/CR5/3/60a Dingwall School Log, 27 January 1886.

55 See Inverness-shire examples HCA/CI5/3/4a Achnarrow School Log, 1887; HCA/CI5/3/6a Aird School Log, 29 August 1898.

56 I. Cartex, *Farmlife in Northeast Scotland 1840-1914: The Poor Man's Country*, Edinburgh, 1979, p. 17.

57 HCA/CI5/3/70a Marydale R.C. School Log, 31 March 1876; Cf. R. Burnett, "'The Long Nineteenth Century': Scotland's Catholic Gaidhealtachd", in *Out of the Ghetto? The Catholic Community in Modern Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1998, pp. 166-68.

58 H. Corr, 'Dominies and Domination: Schoolteachers, masculinity and women in 19th century Scotland', *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 40, 1995.

59 HCA/CS5/3/1/1 Assynt School Board Minutes, 18 December 1873.

qualified cookery teacher from the Lowlands to visit an urban centre, such as Inverness, to give demonstration lessons in both 'high class and artisan cooking'.<sup>60</sup>

The educational authorities assumed that domestic subjects, and especially sewing, were both necessary and useful to working-class girls, but the latter and their parents were more discriminating. While the educational authorities sought to impose a gender-specific curriculum, school logs reveal considerable variation, and indeed informal negotiation between teachers, parents and pupils. There was much less expense involved in teaching traditionally masculine subjects such as Latin, mathematics and even science, which were occasionally open to girls, though in the last, girls were restricted to botany. Other subjects aimed at boys, such as book-keeping and agriculture, were also sometimes offered to girls. It seems, however, that the division into masculine and feminine subjects hardened by the turn of the century, as it had in the Lowlands.

Certainly, though even at the end of the century girls were still more likely to be kept from school than boys, the situation improved for at least a minority of girls. By then, even the SSPCK was promoting post-elementary education to boys and girls. The boys were offered five bursaries for training in 'some trade or mechanical art', and four for Gaelic-speakers to continue their education at secondary schools. There were also four bursaries awarded by competition to Gaelic-speaking young men about to enter university for the first time, and another four awarded to students who had already attended two sessions at university. In addition, two bursaries were offered to boys and two to girls who wanted to become teachers, to enable them to enter a training college: in 1887, 20 boys and 17 girls competed for these.<sup>61</sup> This indicates that in rural areas there were growing opportunities for a lass of parts, though not on the scale offered either in urban centres, or to boys. As noted above, before the 1872 Education Act, and indeed up to the Napier Commission, education in the Highlands 'privileged' boys who were seen as the principal contributor to the family income. However, by the 1880s female education had become more important. One reason was that jobs demanding more than a basic schooling were opening up to women. Another was that where once a solid schooling in the '3Rs' had been regarded as a means to enable male migration, by the late nineteenth century single women predominated in Highland to Lowland migration, notably in the fishing industry.<sup>62</sup> By then, emigration and migration was integral to the Highlands and Islands. The former was more common for men, the latter for women.

Geography continued to limit educational opportunities in the Highlands and Islands at the end of the century. If secondary departments and schools were established, they were in towns. Thus the School Board for Kilmallie decided in February 1893 to establish a secondary department at Fort William Public School. For staff, they sought a male

60 E.g., *Inverness Advertiser*, 11 June 1878 (for Inverness); 4 June 1878 (for Dingwall).

61 *Inverness Courier*, 5 April 1887.

62 T.M. Devine, 'Temporary Migration and the Scottish Highlands in the nineteenth century', *Economic History Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1979; C.W.J. Withers & A.J. Watson, 'Stepwise migration and Highland migration to Glasgow 1852-1898', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1991; W.M. Gordon, 'Highland Daughters, Lowland Wage: The Migration of Single Women from the Scottish Highlands to Abbey Park, Paisley, c. 1851', *Scottish Labour History Society Journal*, no. 32, 1997.

assistant who was both a university graduate and a certificated teacher (at £120 per annum), and a female certificated assistant who also had a university education (at £80 per annum). Besides English and music, she was expected, like the female teacher appointed to the senior department at Kingussie Public School, to concentrate on teaching modern languages to the whole school.<sup>63</sup> Yet even at schools where higher subjects were taught, only a few, and fewer girls than boys, could benefit as both were still expected by their parents to be engaged in agricultural work.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, at Achnarrow Public School in Inverness-shire in 1879 higher subjects were almost discontinued owing to the irregularity of attendance. Nearly 20 years later at another school in that county, where girls as well as boys were taught Latin, the older children were needed so much by their parents that the year's work in Specific Subjects was 'in great measure lost'.<sup>65</sup> Teachers in most Highland schools simply did not have the help, in the form of assistants, to allow them to concentrate on higher subjects. Indeed, the master of a school in Inverness-shire complained in 1891 that if the Board intended to have boys prepared for the universities, it was essential that he be relieved of all standard instruction and that an additional assistant be appointed to help with Specific Subjects. Ironically, within three years, girls outnumbered boys in the secondary department of this school, and were being taught Latin because the new headmaster insisted 'there was no other means of keeping them occupied'.<sup>66</sup> For the most part, Specific Subjects were not taught in the few Highland Catholic schools, though Latin, French, domestic economy and, by the 1890s, cookery, were offered at St. Joseph's in Inverness.<sup>67</sup>

Nevertheless, the impression from the log books is that teachers, female as well as male, strove to maintain the tradition of the parish dominie, teaching the higher branches whenever possible. There were certainly differences between the schooling of boys and girls, as demanded by the government and influenced by prevailing notions of domesticity. It may also have been the small size of most schools and the frequent absences of the older pupils which prompted teachers to offer such traditionally masculine subjects as Latin, mathematics and agriculture to girls as well as boys. No boy appears to have been offered domestic economy, and though boys were taught sewing and knitting in some schools, if they interfered with the boys' regular curriculum, they were dropped. Indeed, schoolmistresses often resented the attention paid to sewing in the girls' curriculum, at least where the Board school was co-educational.

The 1872 Education Act was meant to revive the educational tradition of the 'democratic intellect', central to which was the emphasis on reading for both sexes. Thus, co-education was to maintain the shared experience of girls and boys in the

63 HCA/CI5/26/1 School Board Minute Book of the Parish of Kilmallie, 7 February 1893; HCA/CI5/21/2 School Board of Kingussie Minute Book, 8 February 1886.

64 E.g. HCA/CA5/3/2a Acharacle Public School Log, 13-17 February 1882.

65 HCA/CI5/3/4a Achnarrow Public School Log, 16 May 1882; HCA/CI5/3/14a Braes School Log, 21 May 1896.

66 HCA/CI5/3/53a Grantown Grammar School Log, 5 March 1891, 22 February 1894.

67 HCA/CI5/3/155a St. Joseph's R.C. School Log, February, 1873, May 1876, and the HMI Report for 1898.

ordinary branches of the curriculum. Robert Anderson has argued that compulsion, introduced by the 1872 Act, narrowed the gap between boys and girls in attendance, and that the continuing tendency for poor attendance rates for girls in the middle range was evened out by their growing tendency to stay on longer in school by the late nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup> Anderson concluded that the achievement of the 1872 Act was:

Above all to iron out the remaining inequalities – between Highlands and Lowlands, between town and country, between boys and girls, between prosperous and poor workers – and to extend the same basic standards to all.<sup>69</sup>

The evidence from the Highlands reinforces Anderson's last point, while it qualifies the generalisations put forward by Paterson and Fewell. Apart from sewing, knitting, and less frequently domestic economy and cooking, there was little in the Highland school logs which related to the ideal of domesticity. Resources were severely limited, which meant less emphasis on domestic subjects for girls than in the Lowlands. Indeed, contrary to the view put forward by Paterson and Fewell, the practice of co-education in the Highlands and Islands may have prevented the curriculum for working-class girls from being even more narrowly domestic. In addition, the continuing importance of agriculture meant that older girls and boys shared a common experience of outdoor labour for much of the year, so that the curriculum was generally limited to the basics. Few children, boys or girls, could expect their experience of school to have much influence on their future job prospects if they remained. This situation may be compared to Wales, where local factors (economic and linguistic) similarly influenced education, especially for girls, for whom employment opportunities were particularly restricted, and where, as in Scotland, there was a consistently higher proportion of women in agriculture in contrast to England.<sup>70</sup> There are also similarities with the Irish situation, since migration, both permanent and seasonal, was integral to the Highlands and Islands, before and after school.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, local studies also reveal considerable differences in English educational practice, despite the general insistence on a schooling in domesticity for girls.<sup>72</sup> Thus, the regional and indeed local context helped shape and differentiate female experiences of schooling, and in the case of the Highlands and Islands, mediated the patriarchal nature of the educational tradition.

Certainly, by the end of the century, the schooling of the poor had improved throughout Scotland, and girls had drawn parallel with boys, but the chances of doing so remained slimmer in the Highlands and Islands than elsewhere. Talented girls as well as boys were now encouraged to aim for university, though ironically, the minority of girls who eventually benefited from the meritocratic tradition faced a more strictly defined sexual division of

68 Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People*, pp. 125, 234.

69 Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People*, pp. 246, 299.

70 J. Williams, *Was Wales Industrialised?* Llandysul, 1995; A. John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land*, Cardiff, 1991.

71 D. Fitzpatrick, 'A share of the honeycomb': Education, emigration and Irishwomen', *Continuity and Change*, 1986, vol. 1, no. 2.

72 M. Gomersall, 'Ideas and realities: the education of working-class girls, 1800-1870', *History of Education*, 1988, vol. 17.

labour in the professions than their counterparts did in the fields. Still, for those who wanted to remain in the region, there was a preference for schoolmistresses, since the Highlands and Islands could not compete with the Lowlands for male teachers. Certainly, female teachers on average earned just under half of the average schoolmaster's salary by 1900.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, as Robert Anderson has convincingly argued for Scotland as a whole, women in the Highlands and Islands adapted the classic 'lad of parts to dominie' route both to improve their own education and to become respectably self-supporting.<sup>74</sup>

While this study of the Highlands and Islands concurs with Paterson and Fewell that nineteenth-century Scotland was a patriarchal society, it also cautions against sweeping generalisation. The Old (1790s) and New (1840s) Statistical Accounts both revealed that female education had been particularly neglected in the Highlands and Islands. The 1872 Education Act and the subsequent great expansion of schooling meant that female education there significantly improved by the end of the century. On the one hand, the high and almost identical rates of literacy between the sexes at the end of the nineteenth century gives an impression of growing equality, which masks the lower academic expectations and the occupational inferiority of girls and women. On the other hand, it gives substance to the claim which underpinned the nineteenth-century notion of the 'democratic intellect', that education in Scotland was universal.

73 Report of the Committee of Council on Education, 1900, pp. xxiv, 44.

74 See 'In search of the "Lad of Parts": the mythical history of Scottish Education', *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 19, 1985, pp. 82-104, 84.