

The Mission at Home: The Origins and Development of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge, 1709-1767

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Abstract: The Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge, an Edinburgh-based charitable organisation founded by Royal Charter in 1709, was for much of the 18th century the only organisation of its kind in the Highlands and Islands. After 1800, other religious and charitable bodies followed in its footsteps. Its founding mission was to establish and manage schools in the region, in order to secure both the 1690 Presbyterian settlement of the Church of Scotland, and the Hanoverian succession. In an era when much of Gaelic Scotland still adhered to Episcopalianism or Catholicism, and gave crucial military support to Jacobitism, the SSPCK sought to compensate for the sovereign Westminster parliament's shortcomings and lack of commitment with respect to the integration of the region into the United Kingdom. Present knowledge of the organisation is slanted and partial, and dominated by polemical controversy over its attitudes to the Gaelic language. The English language and 'Reformed Protestantism' were certainly viewed as cornerstones of a revitalised 'North British' identity following the union of 1707. The SSPCK relied primarily on donations from the Scottish Lowlands and England to fund its mission: areas where anti-Gaelic sentiment was often rife. The organisation made expedient use anti-Gaelic rhetoric in garnering support, particularly in the aftermath of the Jacobite Risings. However, practical issues arose when attempting to introduce English literacy to a largely non-literate, monolingual Gaelic-speaking population. Over time pre-conceived ideas of 'Britishness' became more porous. Most strikingly, the Society relied on the labours of willing local Gaelic agents in its endeavour — agents who often took exception to southern prejudice. This study provides a more nuanced overview of the SSPCK, placing the organisation within the context of its time, to better understand the development of perceptions of Britishness and SSPCK attempts to secure the inclusion of the 'indigenous other' as loyal and industrious subjects of the British state and Empire.

Keywords: Charity School Movement, 18th Century Scotland, Gaelic Scotland, Jacobitism, Language

Introduction

The Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK), an Edinburgh-based charitable organisation established by Royal Charter in 1709, was for much of the eighteenth century the only organisation of its kind in the Highlands and Islands. After 1800, other religious and charitable bodies followed in its footsteps. The Society's founding mission was to erect and manage schools in the rural parts in the North Scotland, in order to secure both the 1690 Presbyterian settlement of the Church of Scotland, and the Hanoverian succession. In an era when much of Gaelic Scotland still adhered to Episcopalianism or Catholicism, and gave crucial military support to Jacobitism, the SSPCK sought to compensate for the sovereign Westminster Parliament's shortcomings and lack of commitment with respect to the integration of the region into the British state and Empire. Its mission was first and foremost a religious one, with an overarching emphasis on the 'Encrease of Piety and Vertue within *Scotland*' (NRS GD95/1/1 1709, unnumbered)¹, yet its religious aims were inextricably linked with desired political and cultural ends. Schools were intended to educate poor Highland children in the 'Reformed Protestant Religion', through instructing them 'to Read, especially the Holy Scriptures, and other good and pious Books; As also to Teach Writing, Arithmetick and such like Degrees of Knowlege' (National Records of Scotland [NRS] GD95/1/1, 1709, p. 1). Through inculcating and reinforcing Presbyterian beliefs and forms of worship among children, it was believed that Highland communities would be won over to the post-Revolution political and religious establishment, and would become integrated, industrious, and loyal subjects of the British state and Empire (Stiubhart 2003, 76–77).

Members and schoolmasters were confronted with the challenge of introducing literary education to a predominantly illiterate, Gaelic-speaking population. It was determined that the language of instruction would be English. It is this fact that has hitherto shaped most historical treatments of the Society. Studies carried out by John Lorne Campbell (1950), Victor E. Durkacz (1983) and Charles W. J. Withers (1984) attempt to explain the process by which the Gaelic language reached its present-day state, citing the SSPCK as a primary agent in the drive for 'anglicisation'. However, by

¹ A few documents precede the first numbered page in this bound volume.

focusing solely on the language question, these approaches have led to present knowledge of the organisation being slanted and partial, dominated by polemical controversy yet unconcerned with the more prominent religious and social aspects of the SSPCK's mission (Gray 2011, pp. 6–13).

The Society was seeking to win the hearts and minds of the entirety of Scotland for the Presbyterian kirk and the British protestant succession; and it was carving out, for its members, an important and indispensable role in the Hanoverian state, dealing with a population that it believed would be served no better by the new political centre in London than it had been by Edinburgh. This study will explore the social and religious mission of the SSPCK and examine the ways in which this organisation sought to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion among a population that was invariably viewed by its Lowland and English neighbours as the domestic 'Other'. It will also elucidate the way in which those in the SSPCK managed to carve out a role for themselves within the political landscape of post-Union Scotland by attempting to settle and improve a region that had hitherto only attracted half-hearted, pragmatic treatments from the Scottish government.

The Revolution Church and the Highlands

Following the deposition of the Catholic James VII in favour of William and Mary in 1689, Presbyterians aligned themselves with the Revolution interest and, consequently, gained control of the Church of Scotland. Many in the northern parts of Scotland, around Aberdeen, Inverness and the Western Highlands, opposed the Revolution and the Presbyterian settlement. In these areas, many continued to adhere to the Episcopalian church, but, as a result of the missionary work, there was an increasing Catholic presence in Aberdeenshire and the northwest. It was understood that these religious groups sought a Stuart restoration and, in turn, the disestablishment of Presbyterianism. The General Assembly, the highest court of the Church, set up a Committee for the North in 1690 and with the primary goal of 'purg[ing] out scandalous and erroneous ministers' that posed a threat to the Revolution settlement (CLS, 1690: Act XV, pp. 234–235). However, from 1699 onwards, the Church of Scotland was becoming concerned more specifically with the Highlands. The lobbying efforts of the Synod of Argyll, the bounds of which contained many Episcopal 'curates', had led the General Assembly to modify its rudimentary view of a monolithic 'northern problem'. The Synod drew attention towards problems, such as the paucity of qualified Presbyterian

ministers and the continued popularity of ‘prelatists’ (Episcopalian ministers). These issues affected other regions, yet the situation in the Highlands was particularly bleak due the absence of any real pre-existing core of Presbyterian Gaelic-speakers, excluding many from engaging with the Church. Moreover, many Gaelic-speaking Presbyterian ministers were opting for Lowland parishes (NRS CH2/557/3 [Minutes of the Synod of Argyll], 1690, p. 20; Ferguson 1972, pp. 17–18).

As a result of the activities of the Committee for the North and the lobbying efforts of the Synod of Argyll, the Highlands came to be viewed as a special case, requiring a pragmatic, considered approach to bring it under the care of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. The General Assembly and the Synods of Ross and Argyll worked closely to devise and fund bursary schemes for Gaelic-speaking students who planned to enter the ministry (CLS, 1699: Act IX, pp. 277–286). Furthermore, Argyll had already managed to secure its vacant ministerial stipends to be used ‘for educating and maintaining youth haveing ye Irish language at schools and Colledges for ye work of ye ministry within this province’ (NRS CH2/557/3, 1690 pp. 25–6).² The Synod’s measures would work in conjunction with a 1694 Act of the General Assembly, which effectively banned the settlement of Gaelic-speaking ministers in Lowland parishes (CLS, 1694: Act XXI, pp. 235–245). As stated, the Highlands was more diverse and fluid than the Lowlands with regards to religion, containing many Episcopalians and Catholics, as well as many Presbyterians that were believed to be at risk of apostasy due to the Church’s lack of control in the region. These measures would assist in securing a foothold in the Highlands from which the Church could both reinforce Presbyterian belief, where it existed, and gradually extend its reach into Episcopalian and Catholic regions (Stüubhart 2003, 69). It also was resolved that, where there was not yet a viable Presbyterian candidate, Episcopalians should be allowed remain in place, following a formal examination by the local synod, for the sake of stability and resisting the inroads of the Catholic mission (Ferguson 1972, p. 19).

Providing qualified ministers when required was one way that the church could make progress towards establishing itself among Highland communities. However, education was the primary means by which a set of values and loyalties could be inculcated (Ansdell 1998, p. 90). An Act of Parliament from 1696 ordained that a school

² It should be noted here that ‘Irish’ was the contemporary Lowland nomenclature for the Gaelic language, reflecting the perceived cultural and linguistic divide between Gaelic-speaking and Anglophone regions.

should be planted in every parish, placing financial responsibility—for the school, the house and the schoolmaster's salary—on the local heritor i.e. the legal landowner (Records of the Parliament of Scotland [RPS] 1696/9/144). From the Presbyterian church's point of view, the Gaelic-speaking regions were most in need of education. Martin Martin's *Late Voyage to St Kilda* (1698) and *Description of the Western Isles* (1703) revealed to the Church the ignorance and superstition that was widespread in Gaelic-speaking areas. A native of the Isle of Skye, Martin's accounts of phenomena such as 'Second-Sight' and the self-proclaimed prophet, Ruaridh Mòr, were written to exhibit both the peculiarities of the St Kildans and their genuine hunger for an expression of Christian spirituality in the absence of a minister. Ruaridh Mòr, for example, claimed to have received instructions for his ministry directly from John the Baptist. He was not licensed nor ordained, yet lacking the presence of an ordained minister, many islanders were willing and eager listen to receive his religious instructions (Martin 1999, pp. 281–288; Robson 2005, p. 59). The Presbyterian Church, however, saw nothing but error in need of correction. Nevertheless, Martin's accounts sparked a plethora of initiatives concerning education in the Highlands.

James Kirkwood, The English Society and the Conception of the SSPCK

James Kirkwood, an exiled Scottish Episcopal minister operating from Bedfordshire, had gained prominence for his work with Robert Kirk and Robert Boyle towards publishing and distributing a Gaelic Bible. In the 1680s, Boyle had arranged for a reprinting of Bishop William Bedell's Classical Irish Old Testament. Kirkwood subsequently requested the use of any spare copies and enlisted the services of Robert Kirk, the Gaelic-speaking minister of Aberfoyle, to translate the text into a Roman typeface (Meek, 1988, p. 14). It was hoped that this would facilitate the vernacular preaching of the Gaelic clergy, creating a greater sense of inclusion for Gaels in the national church (Durkacz 1983, p. 19). A number of factors prevented this initiative from taking off, among them, the uncertainty regarding where in the Highlands to send the books (see Meek, 1988 for further discussion). Kirkwood had been working on behalf of an English charitable organisation, the Anglican Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, founded in 1698, towards a proposal for introducing libraries to Highland parishes. In 1704, he submitted a proposal to the General Assembly in favour of the SPCCK erecting libraries in the Highlands for the use of ministers and probationers. He directly cited the case of Ruaridh Mòr, arguing that, in remote locations, libraries

would provide a bulwark against future regressions into religious error and ‘Heathenism’ (NRS, CH1/2/24/1/1, f. 1). There was a degree of mutual suspicion between the Scottish Church and the SPCK, as Presbyterians were concerned that Episcopalian books may threaten the church while some in the SPCK believed that Scottish Presbyterians would sell the books and use the money for other ends, but regardless by 1704 the scheme was allowed to continue (NCL, Kirkwood MSS 3.5.1). However, libraries were only to be erected and regulated through a libraries committee of the General Assembly. Petitions were to be sent out to synods, presbyteries, individual clergy and prominent gentlemen, requesting donations for assisting the scheme (CLS, 1704: Act XVII, pp. 325–337).

At the turn of the century, there was a new emphasis on the education of poor children ‘as a panacea for social, political and religious ills’ (Jones 1938, p. 176). The Anglican SPCK had erected schools in England for the education of poor children and its cooperation with the General Assembly regarding the Highland libraries scheme established a precedent and created more opportunities for cross-denominational collaboration in pursuit of educating the poor. Aware of the SPCK’s schools, from 1701 groups meeting in Edinburgh, known as the Societies for the Reformation of Manners, had trialled a charity school in the parish of Abertarff ‘in the center of a countrey where popery and ignorance did much abound’. However, due to disagreements between heritors regarding the situation of the schools, and the payment of the schoolmaster’s salary, the project would be stillborn (NRS GD95/1/1, 1709, unnumbered). These societies were established by pious and prominent individuals, mostly from legal professions, who were dissatisfied with the moral state of the nation and sought to remedy the negligence of elites in encouraging piety and manners among the population. While initially manifest in nightly patrols around taverns, this central ethos translated well into the movement for Highland charity schools. Heritors in this region were notorious for disregarding their legal obligations vis-à-vis educational provision (see the 1696 Education Act above), despite the ‘atheism, ignorance and profaneness through want of the means of Christian Education and Instruction’ (NRS GD95/1/1, 1709, unnumbered). Kirkwood, aware of the charity school project and all too familiar with the obstructiveness of local elites, began corresponding with these societies. In 1704, as a representative of the SPCK, he recommended to the the erection of a similar organisation for Scotland, culminating in the second Reformation Society’s plans for

pursuing a parliamentary statute for establishing a fund for Highland charity schools (NRS GD95/10/57, 1708, p. 3; CH1/2/24/1/2, 1704, ff. 66-68, f. 117).

In 1707, in response to the proposal submitted by the Manners Society, a Committee for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge was established by the General Assembly to deliberate on these proposals and oversee other charitable projects, but quickly became responsible for all issues pertaining to Highland education. Following some discussion of raising charitable donations towards a catechist fund, in 1708 the Lords of Session present were asked to form a subcommittee to discuss proposals ‘for propagating Christian Knowledge and Erecting Charity Schools’ (NRS GD95/10/10, 1708–1709). It was proposed that a national charitable association be erected, funded by subscribers among whom it would draw its membership. It would rely on charitable donations at parish and presbytery level and an application would be sent to Queen Anne, desiring that a royal charter be granted to the managing body so that it may form a corporation (NRS GD95/10/11, 1708). This came to fruition with the founding of the SSPCK, by Royal Charter, in 1709.

The Corporation

The SSPCK’s stated policy was (NRS GD95/1/1, 1709, p. 1):

To Erect and Maintain Schools, to Teach to Read, especially the Holy Scriptures, and other good and pious Books; As also to Teach Writing, Arithmetick, and such like Degrees of Knowledge in the Highlands, Islands and remote Corners of Scotland.

The unique case of the Highlands presented the founding members of the SSPCK with greater difficulty than that faced by the English SPCK. The scarcity of educational establishments in the Highlands made it necessary for the Scottish Society to act as a centralised organisation and coordinator for the erected schools, while the English SPCK could augment and cooperate with a plethora of pre-existing institutions. Moreover, there was a fundamental distinction in the aims of the respective societies. The SPCK sought simply to instruct poor students in moral behaviour, while reinforcing deference within their social role (Jones 1938, p. 73). In the Highlands the charity school movement, borne partially from the Church of Scotland, was concerned with advancing a destitute population and fostering a pool of divinity students, from which a cadre of Gaelic-speaking Presbyterian ministers could be drawn (Gray 2011, p. 89). This would

settle the religious situation, foster a sense of belonging to the Presbyterian Church and provide a bulwark against Jacobitism.

The Royal Charter, which served as a constitution for the Society's management, elucidates the perception of the Highlands that drove its members to action and reveals the religious motivations behind its mission (NRS GD95/1/1, 1709, unnumbered). Schools were intended to bring about:

The increase of piety and virtue, within Scotland, especially in the Highlands and Islands, and remote corners thereof, where error, idolatry, superstition, and ignorance, do mostly abound, by reason of the largeness of parishes, and scarcity of schools.

At the heart of this was a fundamental belief in the improvability of Scotland's Gaels, provided that they were equipped with the right tools. It was the ordinary Gael's lack of exposure to religious instruction and literary education that had prevented their effective integration into the Scottish kingdom and, subsequently, the British polity. Ignorance, brought about by the absence of Church institutions in the lives of Scotland's Gaels, was understood to be the main factor contributing to their destitution and their susceptibility to erroneous religious doctrine (NRS GD95/1/1, 1709, p. 1). As a result, many had fallen prey to Catholicism, superstition and Jacobitism, which would prolong their unimproved state. Thus it was resolved that in order to effectively alleviate these problems, the Scottish Society would need to act as a centralised organisation and coordinator for the schools erected. The corporate structure of the organisation, guaranteed by its Royal Charter, enabled it to open and operate schools while accepting subscriptions and charitable donations from the public to fund its project. The General Meeting and Directors' Committee were diligent in maintaining up-to-date records of proceedings and discussions and regular pamphlets were published showcasing the Society's work for subscribers and those who were interested. Reliance on donations made it necessary for the Society to foster a positive public image and exhibit sound financial practices (Gray 2011, p. 17). At times, as will be discussed later, reliance on donations from predominantly Lowland, Anglophone population often brought out the anti-Gaelic aspects of the Society that have attracted much attention from historians.

The SSPCK's membership, like that of the Reformation Societies, comprised mainly of lawyers and men who served as church elders, many of whom sought to remedy the lack of penetration of Church and legal institutions in the Highlands (Mitchison 1996, p. 28). In 1774, the Society claimed to assist in bringing the 'blessings

of the glorious Revolution’ to a land where ‘the feudal system still reigned in all its rigour’ (SSPCK, p. 1). However, it is only the ineffectiveness of the 1696 Education Act that looms large in early Society documents. Often wary of its limited resources, the Society aimed to apply funds primarily in areas understood to be vulnerable to the Catholicism and Jacobitism and thus expected parochial schools to be provided elsewhere for educating children (NRS GD95/10/77, 1723). Towards this, the SSPCK often sought ‘to cultivat[e] a Good understanding betwixt the Gentleman in whose bounds the schools are erected’. It understood the usefulness of winning and maintaining the support of Highland elites, ‘who ha[ve] the people intirely at their devotion’, to bring about a hunger for education among their communities (NRS GD95/10/65, 1717). The Duke of Atholl, for example, sat on the first Director’s committee, influencing the placement of one of the first schools at Blair Atholl in 1711 (NRS GD95/1/1, 1711, p. 128).

The Highland Schoolmaster

Concern with maintaining a positive corporate image in urban centres was matched by a stern insistence upon maintaining high standards of moral behaviour in schoolmasters operating in Highland peripheries. These men were to be, first and foremost, men of ‘piety, loyalty, prudence and gravity, who underst[and] and can speak and write both in the English and Irish languages’ (NRS GD95/2/1, 1711, p. 198). It was hoped that, by providing a virtuous example of spiritual leadership, Highlanders would be enticed to the practices and beliefs of the established church and in turn seek to be included in the benefits arising from the Revolution settlement, the Anglo-Scottish Union and, after 1714, the Hanoverian succession. Applicants, who were often recommended by their local presbytery or parish minister, were required to travel to Edinburgh for assessment of their moral and religious character, following which they were asked to demonstrate their knowledge in: reading, writing, arithmetic, church music, the Evangelical System and ‘the popish controversies’ (SSPCK 1714, pp. 18–20; NRS GD95/1/1, 1709, pp. 1–4). Counteracting the Catholic mission in the Highlands was a major priority for the Society and, as most Presbyterians believed that only the ignorant would adhere to Catholicism, it was required that schoolmasters were able to persuasively refute the key tenets of its doctrine (Prunier 2009, p. 25). Moral and religious characteristics were often held in higher esteem than educational qualifications. This is evident in cases where applicants were placed on apprenticeships alongside incumbent schoolmasters or

placed under supervision of the local presbytery when it was judged that their flaws were due to a prior lack of opportunity to learn. For example, in 1762, an applicant to a teaching position in Lochcarron was said ‘to not have the clearest method of imparting knowledge to others’, yet he was still commissioned to teach under the supervision of the presbytery (SSPCK Miscellaneous Papers, William Ross no. 252, quoted in Mason 1954, p. 4). The extra expenditure that this incurred was justified ‘in as much as it tended to increase the number of qualified teachers throughout the Highlands and Islands’ (SSPCK 1796, p. 20).

Following induction, a schoolmaster’s duties were manifold. Religious instruction provided the backbone for the curriculum and teachers were expected to catechise and pray with their students regularly. This was grounded in the belief that the ‘Instructing of that Poor people in the Principles of True Religion’ was the most effective means of reforming the manners and ensuring the progress of students, so they may be ‘not hurtfull to the Comonwealth [but] usefull Members yrof’ (NRS GD95/10/77, 1723). Schoolmasters were also responsible for teaching arithmetic, reading, writing and English pronunciation. They were expected to encourage pious practices among their cohort, escort them to church on the Sabbath and carry out other pastoral duties, such as attending the ill, when not required in the schoolhouse. As most students were from poor families, schoolmasters were not authorised to accept money from parents, but they were encouraged to offer inducements such as shoes, books and apprenticeships to promising scholars (Jones 1938, pp. 185–189; SSPCK 1732, pp. 27–31). Moreover, schoolmasters were not permitted to deploy coercive or punitive measures when attempting to expose Catholic families to Protestant doctrine. In fact, they were encouraged to use only persuasive means and, when successful, to take ‘double care of such [Catholic] children when they come [to the school]’ (SSPCK 1732, p. 30). In 1712, John Clow, schoolmaster at Auchintoul in the Presbytery of Kincardine O’Neil, was censured and removed to another school at the behest of Society’s Directors for attempting to traffic Catholics into a Protestant service (NRS GD124/15/1094/2, cited in Gray 2011, p. 186). This attitude was grounded in the belief that only the ignorant could fall prey to the evils of Catholic doctrine, however, this degree of toleration and insistence upon persuasion is not matched in the records of the Church of Scotland nor those of the Catholic mission in this period (Jones 1938, p. 189).

The Language Problem

The language of instruction in schools was to be English: a point seldom glossed over by historians of the SSPCK (Campbell 1950; Durkacz 1983; Withers 1984). In Lowland Scotland, Protestantism was very much understood to be a scholarly religion, propagated by the printed word. This is reflected in John Knox's *First Book of Discipline*, which called for universal provision of parochial education and placed great emphasis on literacy. However, when Protestantism reached the Highlands in the sixteenth century, it did so through the filter of the Gaelic nobility and the learned orders of the classical Gaelic tradition (Dawson 1994, p. 232). Dissemination to the wider populace was achieved primarily through oral transmission. While John Carswell's 1567 adaptation of Knox's *Book of Common Order*, *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh*, stands out as the first ever book printed in either Irish or Scottish Gaelic, this momentum for printing Gaelic religious texts did not result in the publication of a Gaelic Bible. Written in Classical Common Gaelic and printed using an Irish typeface, the *Foirm* itself was not intended for use by the common people, but by the learned orders who were to take up the mantle of the clergy. Efforts had been made by the Synod of Argyll towards the publication of Gaelic religious texts, but a lack of consistent support from the General Assembly and the civil wars of the seventeenth century prevented the timely fulfilment of this project (Meek 1988, p. 14–15). Thus, by 1709 there was no literary legacy or standardised orthography for vernacular Scottish Gaelic as spoken by the majority in Highland communities. The SSPCK initially placed no proscription on the speaking of Gaelic in schools, nor is it mentioned in any of the founding documents. But, prompted by the frequent inquiries of schoolmasters, it was resolved that schools would not teach the reading of 'Irish', there being no contemporary consensus regarding the adequacy of Irish religious texts for instructing Scottish Gaels. This is not to deny that anti-Gaelic sentiment existed within the membership of the SSPCK—it certainly did—nor is it to disregard some flagrantly anti-Gaelic measures adopted by the Society through the course of its operations. Rather, it is to point out that the language policy of the SSPCK was far from a foregone conclusion and that it was a lesser issue in the Society's agenda than has hitherto been recognised (Gray 2011, pp. 6–13).

When addressed in Society minutes, the language issue often appears as an afterthought. Seldom is discussion raised intentionally, appearing most often in response to the incoming suggestions and proposals of Society employees who were working and living in Gaelic-speaking areas. For example, language policy is

mentioned in 1713 and 1719, but only in response to enquiries from schoolmasters. (NRS GD95/1/1, p. 199; GD95/1/2, p. 32). This fact has been cited by Durkacz (1978, p.36) to suggest that, as anti-Gaelic attitudes were so ingrained in Lowland society throughout the period, a policy of elimination was so obvious as to be beyond the need for regular discussion. However, this claim does not hold up against scrutiny. Many entries in General Meeting minutes reveal that schoolmasters often pioneered in instructing children in the Gaelic psalms and Shorter Catechism. These initiatives often met with the Society's approval, granted that teachers also continue to 'teach them to read only English Books, and do [their] endeavours as soon as [they] can make them understand that language' (NRS GD95/1/1, 1713 pp. 198–199). English literacy was pursued insofar as it was conducive to bringing about greater interaction with nearby English-speaking areas, thus facilitating the integration of the region into wider British sphere. The Jacobite Rising of 1715 seemed to shake the quiet consensus that Gaelic speech and English literacy could viably coexist, but it is not clear whether this was the result of genuine conviction from within the membership or an expedient means of attracting donations from an urban population that was hostile to aspects of Gaelic society.

If we place examples of anti-Gaelic policy and rhetoric within the context of the contemporary political landscape and the practical initiatives pursued by the organisation, it becomes clear that the established view of the SSPCK, as a primary agent of 'anglicisation', is in need of modification (Gray 2011, pp. 213–215). For example, in the aftermath of the 1715 Jacobite Rebellion, when anti-Gaelic sentiment was rife in the southern Scotland and England, the SSPCK's publications and letters to governing bodies rode the tide of public opinion, typified by the submission of a proposal to the London Court de Police which called for the 'reducing [of] these countries to order [...] and rooting out their Irish language' (Mitchison 1996, p. 28; NRS GD95/10/62, 1716; GD95/1/1, 1716, p. 294). However, this was not a policy statement. It was written, with a London audience in mind, as a proposal to the government in favour of the expansion of the school system in the Highlands. The SSPCK was putting itself forward as the agent to put this plan into action, as it believed 'that through the multitude of other weighty affairs at the Court [in London], the same may come to be forgotten' (Gray 2011, 195–197, 213–215; NRS GD95/2/2, 1716, p. 125). Of course, to fund this initiative it was requested that the government provide £20,000 from the revenues of the Forfeited Estates of the Jacobite rebels; funds that the

Society believed its was entitled to, but were not forthcoming. Contrary to the rhetoric in this proposal, by 1725 more pragmatic plans were already in motion for the production of the Gaelic vocabulary, which came to fruition in 1741 with Alexander Macdonald's *Galick and English Vocabulary* (NRS GD95/1/2, p. 344). Similarly in 1750, with anti-Gaelic sentiment still present following the 1745 Jacobite rebellion, an outright ban was proposed for the speaking of Gaelic in an around schoolhouses. In 1753 this became official school policy and censors were appointed to report to schoolmasters, who were then to discipline offenders. It is difficult to establish the extent to which this ban was adhered to in schools, but, despite the ban, by 1754 steps had already been taken by the society towards the publication of a Gaelic New Testament (NRS GD95/2/7, pp. 30–31, 270). The ban was lifted in 1766 and the teaching of Gaelic alongside English literacy was encouraged in schools (NRS GD95/1/5, pp. 105–106). The decline of Jacobitism, the rise of evangelicalism and the penetration in the Lowlands of a more romantic understanding of Gaelic as an ancient language likely shaped this policy. The minister Hugh Blair for example, a Director in 1767, was very interested in Celtic antiquity, engaging positively with James MacPherson's alleged translation of ancient Gaelic texts (MacLeod 2006, p. 92; Leneman 1982, p. 170). Antipathy to Gaelic persisted but this reflected, if anything, the Society's failure to bring about mass English literacy in the Highlands (SSPCK 1774, p. 2). Nevertheless, language policy was far from pre-determined. The SSPCK sought to strike a balance between riding the tide of public opinion and, when possible, adopting a more pragmatic, comparative educational programme that embraced the inclusion of both English and Gaelic, first through oral transmission then, after 1767, through bilingual literacy.

Local Reception and Impact in the Highlands

The SSPCK was very demanding of heritors within whose bounds it operated. On a number of occasions, the Society threatened the removal of schools when it was perceived that heritors were not fulfilling their legal and social obligations. In 1711, the Society refused to send a teacher to Abertarff until the heritor had erected a parochial school and constructed a bridge for the convenience of pupils (NRS GD95/1/1, p. 127). Whether heritors were maintaining an adequate legal parochial schools was a constant point of contention. Accordingly, the first point of action in several of the Society's memorials to the Court de Police. In 1716, Directors composed a list of ninety-three

places in need of parochial schools, while a 1723 memorial it is stated that ‘very few parochial Schools in these Countries, wherethrough the people are bought up in gross Ignorance Popery Superstition and Prophanity’ (NRS GD95/2/2, pp. 134–137; GD95/10/77). Justified or not, the Society records often present heritors, especially those who were Episcopalians or Catholics, as little more than an obstruction to its designs. This arose from a lack of mutual trust and understanding. An Episcopalian heritor published an anonymous pamphlet in 1737 entitled *The Highland Complaint*. He lamented the lack of trust in Highland inhabitants exhibited by the Edinburgh and London elite and stated his belief that the SSPCK was acting as a malevolent buffer between centre and periphery. His main concern was that the SSPCK had gained too much control of the Royal Bounty, a £1000 gift granted annually from the civil list to the Church of Scotland for the reformation of the Highlands (for further discussion, see Stiùbhart 2003). This was intended to pay for catechists and itinerant preachers, to assist ministers in resisting Catholic missionaries, yet many in the Highlands were frustrated that they had little say in the matter of disbursing the funds:

Tho’ our Distance from Edinburgh be not above 140 Miles, yet we find it as sufficient to exclude our Heritors and Ministers, from having any Vote in disposing the pious Funds destin’d for our Welfare as if we were the t’other Side of the Alps. (Anonymous 1737, p. 41)

This criticism was not without foundation. The Directors’ Committee of the SSPCK could boast of only one Gaelic-speaker among its ranks: the Rev. Neil McVicar, minister of the West Kirk in Edinburgh, who served from 1709 until his death 1747. And after the 1715 Jacobite rising, the General Assembly once again ruled that Gaelic-speaking ministers had to serve in Gaelic-speaking parishes, effectively debarring Gaels from participating in the Edinburgh-based SSPCK and the committees of the General Assembly (NRS CH1/1/31, p. 110; Stiùbhart 2003, p. 69). However, that 24 out of 25 schoolmasters continued to successfully operate their schools from August 1715 to January 1716, despite the tumult of the Jacobite rebellion, suggests that many were quickly won over to the Society’s vision: or at least certain parts of it (NRS ND95/1/1, p. 288).

There were many among the tacksman class and lower orders that shared a more positive view and managed to reap great benefits by cooperating with the Society, thereby improving their own positions as well as those of their respective communities. For example, many poor Catholics came to appreciate the Society’s provision of literary

education and were eager to have their children instructed in literacy, despite having no intention of converting to Presbyterianism. As Prunier (2009, p. 24) maintains, while this was obviously beneficial for Catholic families, it served to disprove a key assumption at the heart of the SSPCK's mission: that 'Education was both a preservative against and an antidote to popery'. Moreover, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair—author of the *Galick and English Vocabulary*, famed poet and Jacobite recusant—served as a joint catechist-schoolmaster in Kilmory, Ardnamurchan in Lochaber from 1732 until he abandoned his post to join the rebellion in 1745. During that time, he witnessed some of the benefits that had arisen following increased government interest in the Highlands. In the wake of a Catholic plot to assassinate King George I in 1722, this interest arose out of concerns with the presence of potentially subversive Catholicism in the region (Stiùbhart 2003, 81). The Royal Bounty, in conjunction with General Wade's military presence and road-building schemes, had brought new opportunities and an extended period of peace to the region (Stiùbhart 2003, pp. 138–139). Alasdair owed his position, which included a considerable salary, in part to his kinship ties and his familiarity with the troublesome Rough Bounds in Clanranald territory: an area with large numbers of Priests and Catholic communities believed to be disaffected to the government. At times, ever aware of his own importance, he managed to procure extra money, materials and attention for himself and the school by warning of the 'increase of popery' (Stiùbhart 2013, pp. 71–73; 2012, pp. 14–23). As he gained prominence for his ability to teach, he managed to secure a commission from the Society directors for the composition and publication of the English-Gaelic vocabulary. Similarly, Dugald Buchanan gained prominence for his evangelical work in the charity school in Rannoch, Perthshire and was tasked in 1757 with translating the *Mother's Catechism*, a short explanatory religious text intended for children, into Gaelic (NRS GD95/2/7, p. 430). The SSPCK was certainly seen by some in the Highlands as a vehicle for an oppressive establishment, or as a buffer that denied Gaels the opportunity to negotiate the local pace of social and religious change on their own behalf. However, many also chose to cooperate with and contribute to the Society, some playing a substantial part in the education of their own communities.

Conclusion

This article has drawn together a few key aspects of the SSPCK and touched on a number of the historiographical debates that surround the organisation. Borne out of the

efforts of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Edinburgh Reformation Societies and exiled Episcopal minister James Kirkwood, the SSPCK sought to present its mission as a nationwide, patriotic endeavour. The parts of Scotland that had not yet enjoyed the benefits, nor acknowledged the key tenets, of the Revolution settlement were to be won over and raised above their current state of spiritual and material destitution. This presented a number of issues as, on occasion, the distant Edinburgh membership's desire to inculcate reformed religion and Lowland values often outweighed its sensitivity to local conditions and Gaelic sensibilities, thus hindering a sense of belonging and inclusion among Gaels. One issue, that had stood out above all others, is that of language. Literacy in English was initially prioritised over literacy in Gaelic, however this was mostly due to wider disagreements regarding the viability of using vernacular Gaelic, a diverse and primarily oral language, in print. It was difficult for an Anglophone Edinburgh organisation to support wholeheartedly the printing of books in a language that most members did not understand. Yet the Society primarily sought to employ Gaelic-speaking schoolmasters and it encouraged the use of spoken Gaelic in religious instruction, proscribing the language only intermittently in reaction to the Jacobite rebellions (NRS GD95/1/4, 1753, p. 510; GD95/2/7, 1750, pp. 30–31).

The Highland schoolmaster is perhaps the most significant character to emerge from the SSPCK. It is understandable that many could not cope with the meagre wages, inhospitable landscapes and, at times, hostile communities that they confronted. However, the vast majority of employees held tenaciously to their task, adhering to the Society's strict moral code and attracting many Highlanders to their schools. Even those who became disillusioned by the Society, or were perhaps never fully committed to its vision in the first place, made a positive contribution to their respective communities. Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair is a case in point. For him, the role of catechist-schoolmaster in Kilmory may have simply been a promising employment opportunity in a land seriously lacking them. Nevertheless, he carried out his duties with diligence and successfully deployed his skills in social role-playing to better his own position and attract further investment in his locality. This is not to suggest that the SSPCK was to any extent colonised by men such as Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, but it is clear that the organisation provided a sense of belonging, a source of patronage and a substantial creative outlet for many confident and highly-skilled Gaels who were trying to adjust to the seemingly irreversible course of social, economic and political change in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

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