

Notes and Comments

The SSPCK and the Question of Gaelic in Blair Atholl

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During the eighteenth century the chronic shortage of Gaelic-speaking ministers in the Highlands of Scotland led the General Assembly to hand out bursaries to likely students who spoke 'Irish' (then the usual term for Scottish Gaelic). However, from its inception in 1709 until its reversal of policy in 1766, the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) forbade the teaching of Gaelic in any of its charity schools.

The initial aim of the SSPCK was, in Establishment terms, to 'civilise' the Highland area, which was seen as a hotbed of Jacobitism, Episcopalianism and Roman Catholicism. In order to turn the inhabitants of that part of the country into loyal Presbyterian citizens it was considered necessary to extirpate their language.'

One of the earliest areas to receive the benefit of the Society's charity schools was Atholl in Highland Perthshire, largely owing to the interest shown by the 1st Duke of Atholl, who was a founder member. On 20 March 1719 the SSPCK's committee reported to the main body that James Murray, schoolmaster at Blair Atholl, taught children the 'Irish Catechism and Irish psalms' (the only part of the Scriptures at that time translated into Gaelic) after they could read the Scriptures in English. He did this 'for the good of their ignorant parents who understand not English, That the Children, when they come home at night, may be in case to read to the Families for the Edification thereof'. He asked for some 'Irish psalm books' for this purpose. In the wake of the Highland Risings, however, Murray's request was refused: the Society 'resolved to give no encouragement to the Teaching to read in the Irish Language, and therefore will furnish no Books for that purpose'.

A year later, on 12 March 1720, the committee reported 'that the schoolmaster makes it his bussiness to teach his schollars to read the Irish psalm book and Catechism'. The Society wrote to Murray to affirm that they were determined that none of their schoolmasters would teach 'Irish' and forbade him to do so. On 2 June 1720, it was reported that the minister of Blair Atholl had written as follows:

as to the teaching of Irish, he attests that Mr Murray teaches none Irish, but such as can read and speak English and can write and cypher, and that his design therein was that some persons who are never like to come to the knowledge of the English might have a portion of Scripture read to them in their own Language with the Catechisms and other means of knowledge in their own families by the Societies schollars, and that by this means several

parents who could not read had got the questions by heart in their houses which was a great help to the Minister in so great a charge, when it is not possible for him to get such a vast multitude overtaken in his ordinary diets of Catechiseing which must be in the winter season only, and the Minister pleads, that the Society might allow their schoolmaster to teach those who are ripe in English to read Irish for the ends forsaied, which would make Religion to flourish more than it does in that Countrey.

The committee also reported a similar letter from James Murray, and went on to report:

The Committee having considered those Letters ordered a return to be written thereto, shewing that the Societies design was not to discourage any proper means of Instruction in the Principles of Christianity but to forward the same, and yet not to continue the Irish Language but to wear it out, and learn the people the English tongue, and therefore dischargeing the learning and to read Irish unless they can first read and understand English.

However, this was not enough for the General Meeting.

They did not agree to their Committees opinion as to the teaching of Irish, and therefore ordered Letters to be written to the Minister & Schoolmaster, shewing them, that the case proposed by them about teaching the schollars to read Irish after they can read and speak English was laid before the Society, and that they have thought fitt to order not only Mr Murray, but all others their schoolmasters to forbear to teach reading Irish upon any pretext whatsomever, unless they get new and particular directions in that matter from a General Meeting of the Societie.

Murray had no choice but to comply, though in his letters reported 10 March 1721 and 22 March 1722 he continued to regret not being able to teach his pupils the Catechism and psalm book.²

The avowed purpose of the SSPCK was to instil proper religious principles into the supposedly misguided Gaels who lived beyond the Highland line. However, as shown above, when given the opportunity to spread the Gospel more effectively in the large and sprawling Highland area of Atholl, the Society's prejudice against the Gaelic language proved to be much greater than its missionary zeal.

In 1766 it became generally known that many Highland children were simply parroting the Scriptures in English without actually understanding what they were saying, and from then on the teaching of Gaelic was allowed (although English still remained the primary language of instruction). It may seem surprising that it should take fifty-seven years for the SSPCK to become cognisant of this lack of understanding on the part of the children; however, in 1760 the so-called 'epic' of Ossian first appeared, and its effect on the Scottish literati was seminal.³ The Highlanders became idealised as 'noble savages', along with their accoutrements, their dress, and—to a certain extent at least—their language. English was still the language of 'civilisation', but Gaelic was that of 'antiquity', and amongst Highland ministers and others a new and keen interest in the Gaelic language was born.

NOTES

- 1 For a history of the SSPCK see the chapter on it in *The Charity School Movement* by Mr. G. Jones, Cambridge 1938.
- 2 SSPCK Minutes. Scottish Record Office. GD 95/1/2.
- 3 For an examination of the effects of Ossian on the Scottish literati see my M.A dissertation, 'The Creation of the Highland Image in Lowland Scotland 1745-1831' (Edinburgh 1979).