

‘[AN] EDUCATIONAL CRISIS IN SCOTLAND’: THE DEMOCRATIC INTELLECT REVISITED

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‘The *Edinburgh Review* seems to have been right in its contention that the Indian Civil Service examinations precipitated an educational crisis in Scotland’.

Davie (1961/1982, p. 44).

ABSTRACT

In George Elder Davie’s 1961 work “The Democratic Intellect”, it was noted that there was a distinctive Scottish intellectual and academic tradition, one of philosophical quizzicality, which was disrupted and mortally wounded in the 1850s by a calculated programme of anglicisation of the Scottish universities. This article takes as its starting point Davie’s central, though as yet untested, empirical claim that the relatively poor performance of Scottish candidates in the 1853-8 examinations for entry into the prestigious Indian Civil Service (ICS) gave a significant fillip to those seeking grounds to reform Scottish higher education. It suggests how this proposition (which is vital to Davie’s argument) might be scrutinised using extant archival records of the erstwhile ICS. Understandably, the conclusion suggests the need for future work.

INTRODUCTION

Deriving its name from a remark made by Walter Elliot (1888-1958), sometime Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland and later Minister of Health, the concept of the “democratic intellect”, or democratic intellectualism, can provoke admiration and animosity in equal measure. Indeed, the legacy of the Scottish enlightenment, which has been lauded as little short of ‘The Scots’ invention of the modern world’ (Herman, 2003) interacting with Scotland’s distinctive presbyterian culture, was a peculiar tendency in Scotland towards a ‘quizzicality’ or ‘criticality’. This ‘philosophical quizzicality’ dominated its universities in their life and learning until towards the end of the nineteenth century when it was all but suppressed in the culmination of a process of anglicisation that had then been underway for at least half a century.

THE DEMOCRATIC INTELLECT

Writing more than two decades after Davie first proposed his controversial thesis, R D Anderson took the unusual step of producing an entire appendix to his *Education and Opportunity in Victorian Scotland* (Anderson, 1983: 358-361) committed to refuting Davie’s claims. In subsequent works (Anderson, 1992 & 1995) he has repeated his counter-claims, though most recently he has simply ignored his old sparring partner altogether and expounded an uninhibited account of his version of Scottish education history, one characterised by far less distinctiveness than Davie would have us believe (Anderson, 2003). Challenging not only George Davie’s specific claims as to the nature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Scottish universities, but also their wider application, Anderson has suggested that: ‘This phrase [the democratic intellect] has become celebrated, and is used to refer to such “democratic” features as mass literacy... but Davie’s book concentrated on the university curriculum, arguing that it embodied a traditional “social ethics” which linked the country’s intellectual leadership with the common people... traditions

[that were said to have been] coming under attack in the nineteenth century' (Anderson, 1995:21). Others have sided resolutely, if more or less explicitly, against Davie, and, by implication at least, with Anderson. For Anderson, Davie is guilty of various crimes, including, *inter alia*, caricaturing the state of English university education as desiccated classicalism and nothing more: 'oversimplify[ing] the contrast between Scottish general and English specialized curricula' (Anderson, 1992:31).

Davie can also stand accused of ignoring the degree of mutual influence at work between Scottish and English universities in the nineteenth century. In assuming an entirely one-way traffic of ideas (south to north) he can perhaps be charged with ignoring the influence of Thomas Campbell (1777-1844; a Scots born and educated poet and writer) who initiated a campaign for the establishment of institutions of higher education free of Oxbridge's Anglican stranglehold. This was an ambition achieved for London in 1836. The publication of Campbell's account of his Scottish university days, edited by William Beattie (1793-1875) in 1849, did much to encourage the belief in England that some alternative(s) to Oxford and Cambridge might be possible (Yasuhara, 2002). Indeed the generally unremarked trend of Scottish influence on English higher education well into the twentieth century is a subject only now beginning to be studied (Lowe, 2003).

However, surprisingly many writers, commenting on the controversy from within Scotland (Devine, 1999) and from vantage points elsewhere (Rothblatt, 1992), have been prepared to pursue a middle course and allow Davie some 'benefit of clergy' - the philosopher's 'right' to be slightly cavalier with facts in pursuit of an argument: 'historians writing about Scotland have tended to emphasize the democratic character of Scottish education. Although Robert Anderson (1983) has pointed out how much of this is mythistorie [sic], there certainly remains some comparative truth in it' (Rothblatt, 1992:1822). In turn, others again have taken the more circumspect path of tending to deny that there is anything 'in' Davie's various claims, while retaining his distinctive language as a *desideratum*: democratic intellectualism ought to be the apotheosis of university life and any sense of academic value(s), whether it is so, or was ever so, or not (Paterson, 2003). Yet again, some have apparently accepted Davie's claims but are unafraid to see this process (if it occurred) of the adoption of English *mores* in Scottish education as no bad thing. 'Putting philosophy into the young 'teens [sic] was done at the expense of equally desirable subjects... Scots [students], unless they had added further study at Oxford to their own, were [thus] handicapped' (Mitchison, 1980:138). But even invoking the fringe nationalist literature in which Davie finds much support, some of it very fringe indeed (Gardiner, 2000), his critics have the dominant voice:

'Specifically nationalist preoccupations...are never far from the surface in the writings of George Elder Davie, who can with some justice be regarded as the Dugald Stewart¹ of our own day, for he has assumed Stewart's mantle as the public guardian and expositor of Scotland's national philosophical tradition. Echoing Stewart's emphasis on the "liberality" of the Scottish universities... [he has] set out to identify the distinctive characteristics of the Scottish tradition during the turbulent years of the nineteenth century' (Wood, 2000:12).

The general and widespread belief has emerged that Davie, by his own admission a philosopher turned historian, is rather better as the former than the latter: successfully articulating a vision of what education in a university *ought* to be, but failing at the last to show that it was ever entirely thus in immediate post-enlightenment Scotland.

Since publishing *The Democratic Intellect* in 1961 Davie has returned to the subject of Scottish education and its philosophical base(s) in various, though less widely noticed, works (Davie, 1986; Davie, 1991; Davie, 1993; Davie, 1994). In

typically dusty prose he has made at least one sideswipe at Anderson, in the text of a lecture delivered in 1985, scorning ‘the public patronage accorded last year [sic - actually 1983] to a book on education in Victorian Scotland’ (Davie, 1991:97). Most recently he has finally released the published version of his doctoral thesis, which might perhaps be called the *ur* work of his *oeuvre* (Davie, 2001).²

It is not the intention of this article to add to the polemical arguments that swirl around Davie’s main works. But, rather, to pose this question: can his most obvious empirical claim be either quantifiably verified or refuted? That is to say, the claim that the Indian Civil Service examinations precipitated an ‘educational crisis in Scotland’ (Davie, 1961;1982:44) by their tendency to favour English (meaning Oxford and Cambridge) graduates over their Scottish *confreres* and thus to deny many hopeful young Scots preferment in the prestigious and lucrative Indian service.

THE INDIAN CIVIL SERVICE

The most easily established facts can be set out as follows. It is not in dispute that by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries careers in what was then the Honourable East India Company, which began exploring in and trading with the East Indies and elsewhere in 1601, were deemed very attractive in Scotland. While the Company allowed private trade on the part of its employees (the shipping back of lucrative cargoes of spices and other commodities) there were fortunes to be made. The regulation and protection of the Company’s growing assets in India, and worldwide, came increasingly to demand the recruitment of skilled administrators and it was from this base that the Indian Civil Service (ICS) was subsequently to grow. ‘It was during the last thirty years of the eighteenth century that there came into being the administrative structure which survived, little modified, until the end of the colonial period... This administrative consolidation was a continuation of the process of British expansion itself’ (Bayly, 1988:76). Over time the acceptability of private trade declined and the Company came under pressure to regularise aspects of its affairs. In 1782 powers previously vested solely in the hands of Company employees and stockholders came to reside in a Board of Control: a sharing of authority between Company and government. But becoming an ICS ‘civilian’ was still attractive. ‘When the Company lost its trading monopolies in favour of government in India, the ICS grew to be one of the most prestigious and uncorrupt administrations of its kind anywhere in the world’ (Wild, 2000:169). And Scots were in the thick of it all. ‘As a social group, the main body of Company servants in India [by the mid-eighteenth century]... was drawn from mercantile families, very often Scottish in origin’ (Lawson, 1993: 72). The advent of the Board of Control brought an end to the acquisition of vast wealth (sometimes, though not always, by dubious means) on the part of Scottish ‘nabobs’ (a racy account of some early figures of this sort is available in Dalrymple, 2002) but Scotland’s imperial links with India endured long after that.

Prominent Scottish administrators and soldiers associated with India in the period of the Company include George Bogle (1746-1781), Hugh Cleghorn (1820-1895), James Andrew Broun-Ramsay (1812-1860) (better known as the Marquis of Dalhousie, a sometime Viceroy), Montstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) (a soldier, administrator and historian who played a large part in reorganising Indian schools), John Leyden (1775-1811), John Muir (1810-1882) (brother of William, see below), Hugh Falconer (1808-1865) (an administrator and scientist, also professor of botany in the University of Calcutta, now Kolkata) and Charles James Napier (1782-1853).

In later generations William Muir (1819-1905), Charles Macgregor (1840-1887), James MacNabb Campbell (1846-1903), Gilbert George John Murray Kynynmond-Elliot (1845-1914; mercifully, more often known as the fourth Earl of Minto, Viceroy, 1905-1910) and Francis Napier (1819-1898; also a Viceroy) also served in various capacities and with varying degrees of distinction. And others again went to India

in the service not of mammon but God, as missionaries. Best remembered amongst the many Scottish clergymen who worked in India in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries include: Claudius Buchanan (1766-1815), Alexander Duff (1806-1878), John Anderson Graham (1861-1942) and John Wilson (1804-1875; founder of a prestigious school in what was then Bombay, now Mumbai) (Goring, 1992). In the period of the Company and subsequently, the influence of India on Britain (including Scotland) was every bit as great as that of Britain on India – if not greater (Marshall, 2002; Robb, 2002).³

It is also not in dispute that the Company, in its latter days at least, took the education of its employees seriously. In 1806 a specialist college, Haileybury, was established to train Company cadets and it was there that Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) infamously propounded his view, that a little starvation (almost) never hurt anyone, from his position as professor of political economy and philosophy. In line with the somewhat piratical origins of the Company, admission to Haileybury was by patronage and preferment rather than competition: but in 1826 this feature of the organisation's past also disappeared with the first round of entrance examinations being held. In 1853 Haileybury was wound up (though it has gone on to be the site of a still extant public school of some repute) and direct entrance examinations for Company civil service posts became the norm. But events were set to take a more dramatic turn with the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny (or, as some prefer to say, First Indian War of Independence). 'It so happened that the last class graduated at Haileybury just a few months before the Company lost its mandate due to the Mutiny of 1857' (Kulke & Rothermund, 1998:238). After the end of that conflict, with British rule in India now being synonymous with British governmental rule, the Company being finally excluded, entry into the ICS continued to be by competitive examination. While not perhaps on a par with the fiendishly complicated tests that once regulated admission to the Chinese imperial administration⁴. Nonetheless 'The (ICS) entrance examinations were formidably difficult' (Wild, 2000:169) and indeed remain so to this day for the ICS's successor bodies in independent India, with qualification still fiercely contested (Balakrishnan, 2003).

THE EDINBURGH REVIEW

Furthermore, it is not in dispute that there was a great deal of consternation in Scotland to the effect that, as Davie has suggested, Scots did less well in entry into the ICS than hitherto because Scottish higher education at the mid-point of the nineteenth century was ill-suited to preparing aspirant candidates. In large part, this concern was expressed in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review* (a publication closely linked to the radical Whig party) and the *Times*, letters on Scottish university reform, including several in 1858 (the year of transition from Company to government control and of the Universities Act) came from prominent figures such as J F Ferrier (The Scotch Universities, 17 July 1858, p. 5) and others using typically Victorian pseudonyms such as 'A Glasgow MA' (Scotch University Reform, 7 January 1858, p. 7), 'A Glasgow Man' (Scotch University Men, 23 March, p. 12) and 'Reformer' (Scottish University Reform, 10 June, p. 7).⁵

According to Sheldon Rothblatt: '[In the 1850s] there was a lengthy quarrel between the proponents of Scottish and English university education... in a new and important political-literary periodical. The quarrel forced the more serious dons to review the basis upon which Oxford education was conducted' (Rothblatt, 1997:145; for details of the Oxford *milieu* of that period, see Annan, 2000). Thus there was certainly interaction between Scottish and English higher education prompted by the *perception* that the post-1853–8 ICS examinations disadvantaged Scots and this in turn may have contributed to the 'foundations of the modern Scottish universities [being]... laid by the 1858 [Universities] Act... [which] saw the last florescence of several Scottish university traditions' (Scotland, 1969, vol. 1, p. 144).

Although much remained distinctive about the Scottish universities from that time onwards, especially in matters of student politics and rectorial election (Arbuthnott, 1997; Limond, 2000; Wintersgill, 2001), and in patterns of admission and attendance (Anderson, 1992; Universities Scotland, 2001; Guardian, 2003),⁷ this far-reaching and controversial legislation reformed the literally medieval governance of the Scottish universities. But, much more than this, the question remains, *pace* Davie, *did* ‘the 1858 settlement (allow the would-be anglicisers who now rose to dominance in these new structures)... to give classical philology and pure mathematics a privileged position which they had never had in Scotland before’? (Davie, 1982:70-71) Certainly, if this *was* the case, because such subjects were valued for ICS entry and because Scottish graduates were taken to be lacking in the requisite skills and knowledge, this would be an instance of a very small tail (at its height, in the twentieth century, the ICS was nothing more than ‘[a] tiny cadre [of men], a little more than a thousand strong’ (Dewey, 1993, p. 3)) wagging a considerably larger dog: the entire Scottish university undergraduate population of the mid-nineteenth century and beyond. And indeed this was a point made forcibly in the principal *Edinburgh Review* article to which Davie refers, the piece that posited the most direct link between the (supposed) fall-off in Scottish success in the Indian service and the (supposed) deficiencies of Scottish university education. The piece took the form of a *portmanteau* review of six pamphlets, books and reports produced between 1846 and 1857, all concerned with the Scottish universities, including two works by John Stuart Blackie ⁶ and one of Davie’s villains of the peace for his advocacy of university reform.

Drawing on Blackie, but not endorsing his views entirely or solely, the *Review* argued that ‘Of the many benefits which...the Union of kingdoms [1603] has conferred on Scotchmen [sic]... East India Company [employment] was the most unquestionabl[y] great of them’. However, it went on to make it clear that ‘important as this objective [preparing candidates for successful entry to the ICS] is, it is very far from being the most important end that the universities of Scotland have to propose to themselves’. Thus, while it endorsed reform (‘The system... followed in conferring the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Germany... [is] deserving of imitation wherever anything beyond “smattering” is aimed at’), including some degree of emulation of practices common in Oxford and Cambridge (‘Public opinion in Scotland has called emphatically for the introduction of the tutorial system [in Scotland] since the adoption of the Indian Civil Service Examination...[and] we entirely go along with the prevailing opinion’) it certainly did not do so on the grounds of un-reserved support for all things English. But Davie is clearly right that the *Review* claimed to be able to detect a widespread determination for change, widespread amongst those whose sons had any hope of attending university at least, attributable to the imagined correlation between ICS preferment and an English-style higher education. ‘On the adoption of the Indian Civil Service examination... apathy and indifference to the conduct of the higher educational institutions of Scotland was succeeded on the part of the middle classes by a... restless impatience for [reformative] action’ (*Edinburgh Review*, 1858). However, to say that this was ‘imagined’ is not to say that it did not happen, only that without access to comparative statistics it is impossible to know for certain that it did occur.

The records of the former ICS now archived in the British Library cover those of the Company years during the period from its demise to Indian independence shortly after the Second World War. The records are extensive, to say the very least; their total scope being estimated at 9 miles of carefully boxed reports, letters and other documents (Moir, 1988/1996). But it is in these that the answer must lie to the question posed above: did Scottish applicants do less well in seeking admission to posts in India in and after 1853, or even 1858, than before? The historian and journalist Michael Fry has recently offered his own answer, though on quite what evidence is not apparent.

‘Scots [from the mid-1800s] could no longer exert much direct political influence on the Raj. They did provide the odd Viceroy [eg. Napier, 1872 and Minto, 1905-1910]. But they had never got over the introduction of competitive examinations for the Indian Civil Service in 1853, which permanently and drastically cut the numbers of them in positions of authority... [to] an average of just three or four of the 30 annual appointments’ (Fry, 2001:325). He does however go on to quote one John Wilson, ‘a son of the manse from Perth’ and also an ICS civilian as claiming that ‘It is a mistake to suppose, as some have done, that the examinations are so conducted as to favour lads educated under the English public-school [and, by extension, English university] system’ (Fry, 2001:325). But Fry’s references are not easily followed and it is unclear how he derives the three or four from 30 figure. For that matter it is not entirely clear to which period this refers: immediately in and after 1853-1858?; all the way to 1948? It is not even clear when his John Wilson was writing. Fry’s notes do refer to Clive Dewey’s study of the mind, or *mentalité*, of the ICS in its paternalistic mission towards India (Dewey, 1993) but Dewey’s detailed reconstruction of the intellectual and moral influences at work on British civilians in India concerns primarily later servants of empire, such as the brothers Kenneth Darling (1879-1964) and Malcolm Darling (1880-1969) both ICS ‘high-flyers’ in the twentieth century. And, more to the point, Dewey offers no empirical claims, speculative or grounded in archival research, as to the prevalence of Scots in the ICS after the mid-1850s. He does however suggest that George Darling (1782-1862), Malcolm and Kenneth’s grandfather, was an influence on them in their later work, if only vicariously through his son/their father, Thomas Darling (1816-1893). The eldest of these was the son of a farmer and himself qualified as a doctor, graduating in Edinburgh University early in the 1800s. Dewey attributes to George Darling an intellect that ‘could only have been... [formed in] a Scottish university *circa* 1800... [in an] education system dominated by philosophy... [that] made other disciplines (including medicine) more philosophic’ (Dewey, 1993:109). Dewey’s source for his description of that academic *milieu* is none other than George Elder Davie. Thus, although Fry does not cite Davie (perhaps because their political positions would tend to be fundamentally incompatible, Fry being a prominent Scottish Conservative and Davie being identified with both nationalist and broadly radical causes), he does cite Dewey and Dewey in turn cites Davie. But none of this circularity gets us anywhere: Michael Fry may be quite correct, and he may bear out Davie in his being so, but how does he know that it was so?

CONCLUSION

In the end, perhaps it comes to this: it has taken forty years for it to become evident that the only way of dealing properly with Davie’s central empirical claim, that the beginning of the end for the (supposed) tradition of Scottish philosophical learning came about as a direct result of the postmortem following the 1853-8 ICS examinations, would be to inspect the ICS’s personnel and examination records and establish once and for all if there was a definitive fall off in Scottish entry into Indian service. Davie’s more polemical claims have been discredited to the satisfaction of his detractors – but will probably never be dented in the eyes of his supporters: namely that it was deliberate anglicisation that was to blame for change in Scottish higher education and that this was to Scotland’s detriment. But that is beside the point. To repeat: there is only one certain way to confirm or refute his empirical assertion. As yet, this work has not been undertaken. To do so might be a relatively easy matter. In the most extreme formulation of the case against Davie, his claims are ‘for the most part, historical invention’ (Kenevan, 2003:676). This is almost certainly a little harsh, but, in one respect at least, Davie’s central claim regarding the impact of the ICS examination system on the Scottish universities’ curricula in the mid-1800s, a little more (empirical) analysis might lead to a little less (polemical) debate.

NOTES

1. Dugald Stewart (1753-1828), philosopher of the enlightenment: Professor Mathematics (1775-1785) and of Moral Philosophy (1785-1810).
2. Of the relationship between his best known and his most recent works, he says: '[*The Democratic Intellect*] originated almost accidentally... [when] I was preparing for the press a doctoral thesis on the "Scottish school of common sense philosophy", and had been asked by the publishers to add a chapter on the intellectual and social background of the Scottish philosophers... I [subsequently] became... absorbed in "the story behind the story"' (Davie, 1961/1982, Foreword:vii).
3. What might be called the literary trope of the 'imperial Scot' certainly also entered the canon, and remained there throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as indicated by the character of Major Callendar, a military doctor, in the 1924 work *A Passage to India* by Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970), described by a knowledgeable critic, Oliver Stallybrass (1925-1978), as 'one of the great novels of all time' (Stallybrass, 1989:24), and widely recognised for the veracity of its portraiture.
4. One disgruntled candidate of the tests for the Chinese Imperial Administration launched a set of events which came to be known as the 'Taiping Rebellion' of 1850 to 1864 (Spence, 1996).
5. Other significant contributions in the correspondence columns of the *Times* on the theme of Scottish higher education between 1853 and 1858 (the dates of the first ICS examinations and the *Review* article, and the pivotal years in Davie's thesis, looking only at those by named signatories, include pieces by James Lorimer (1818-1890; professor of public law, Edinburgh), Scotch Universities, 26 December 1855, p. 9, and John Stuart Blackie (1808-1895 – see above), The Scottish Universities, 18 November 1857, p. 12. Lorimer was an advocate of reform, though one of whom, unlike Blackie, Davie does not necessarily disapprove and whose influence he discusses (Davie, 1961;1982:47).
6. 1809-1895; a classics professor variously in Aberdeen, 1841 to 1852, and later in Edinburgh University, 1852 to 1882.
7. Previously: Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals.

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