

The weight of history: structures, patterns and legacies of secondary education in the British Isles, c.1200–c.1980

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This article serves as context for the other papers in this special issue, all of which deal with developments in UK secondary education since c.1980. The paper comprises a review of selected impulses and imperatives that saw the substantial legacy of medieval and humanist schooling in Britain re-shaped, during the period c.1830–c.1980, into the outline of today's landscape of secondary schooling. Three parallel themes are examined: the influence of universities and examinations in framing the secondary curriculum; the role of ideas about ability in shaping the growth of secondary education; and the place of practical/technical education in the secondary school years. By tracing these themes, an account of the changing patterns of institutional provision across the British Isles is provided that, by 1980, had led to a thriving independent sector of schools for a small minority coexisting alongside the massive enterprise of broadly comprehensive, state-funded secondary education in which significant tensions remained between separate 'grammar' and 'upper-elementary' traditions. Conclusions are drawn as to significant aspects of this historic inheritance acting on developments in secondary education in the contemporary era.

Keywords: UK; historical; secondary; schools; universities; merit

The legacy of medieval and humanist education in the British Isles to c.1830

Across the British Isles in the later medieval period, as now, population and wealth was distributed unevenly and, as a result, patterns of education were also far from uniform. On the one hand secular schools of various kinds existed to serve centres of economic activity, especially in towns, with the volume of places provided fluctuating in proportion to local occupational opportunity. Broadly speaking, densities were higher in the south of England than the north, and in Dublin, Edinburgh and a handful of Scottish towns compared to the rurality of the remainder of Ireland and Scotland, and all of Wales (Broadberry, Campbell, and van Leeuwen 2010, 24; Mayhew 2003, 109; Graham 2003, 157; Carr 2003, 96). On the other hand a countervailing influence was the steadily growing network of religious houses and their associated vocational schools for girls and for boys, administered by the various monastic orders across Europe and liable to become rooted in a wide variety of urban and rural settings across the archipelago (Orme 2006, 255–87; McGrath 1979: 180–99; Jones and Roderick 2003, 4–7; Scotland 1969a, 11–17).

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In England, where records are by far the most abundant, there was much greater wealth and a wide variety of schools developed earliest. It is clear that by the twelfth century (and probably a good deal earlier) schools outside the religious houses had become places accessible to the public and had diversified markedly, establishing the mix of institutions and related curricula that were to remain largely in place until the mid-nineteenth century. By 1200 all major towns in England had a school accessible to the public and by the fifteenth century such schools were being accessed by members of most groups, other than those at the very top and the very bottom of society, predominantly by boys but also by girls. Already there was a hierarchy of school-types linked to the ambition, talent, interests and resources (social and economic) of would-be pupils and their families. In turn, the schools were attuned to prevailing rhythms of local wealth generation, enterprise and philanthropy, and came, overall, to comprise a pattern of national schooling similar to that found in other of the wealthier economies of Europe (Briggs 2011, 238–9; Orme 2006, 47–9, 193, 53–55, 66, 166–7).

Those schools offering career preparation of various kinds within the church provided manpower for the largest institution in medieval Europe, while the secular schools which taught Latin grammar (for boys only) were also part of pan-European literate culture that was already becoming identified with an emerging professional class (Green 2009, 55–6; Briggs 2011, 236–8; O'Day 2007, 415). The Henrican reformation of the 1530s in England, Wales and Ireland, and that led by John Knox in Scotland in the 1550s, saw the dismantling of schools supervised by the religious orders but by the 1440s in England the beginnings of the systematic endowment of grammar schools are apparent, an impulse that had seen at least 114 such foundations established by 1530. From the late fifteenth century similar endowed schools, teaching boys only, can be traced in Scotland and in the next century these spread first to Ireland and then to Wales (Orme 2006, 230–1, 236). In Scotland, almost all of the 80 or so burghs (incorporated towns) had assumed control of a grammar school by c.1600 (Anderson 1997, 9). The largest, in Edinburgh, had five staff but most were smaller, typically with one master and an assistant. As such, they were similar in scale to private competitors and many burghs put effort into attempts to smother such competition (Scotland 1969a, 14, 71, 81, 75). In Ireland, legislation in 1570 authorised the establishment of grammar schools in the main towns of each of the 34 Anglican dioceses but many established none and those that were created sat alongside a few town grammar schools (analogous to the Scottish burgh schools), a handful of wealthier foundations taking boarders endowed by individual benefactors and, in Leinster and Ulster, a royal grammar school planted singly in seven of the various counties by James I and his successors from 1614 (Atkinson 1969, 29–34). Meanwhile, in Wales 22 small grammar schools had been endowed across in the country in the century following the reformation (Jones and Roderick 2003, 13; Archer 1921, 287–8).

England remained considerably wealthier than its neighbours, held much of Ireland and Wales in political subjugation and was physically closest to continental trends in education. As a result, it had the most elaborate provision of schools teaching beyond a rudimentary level. The secular and publicly-accessible schools established by the mid-fifteenth century prevailed, with only minor change, until the state began to regulate schooling and expand access to it 400 years later. By 1640 in England there were, perhaps, 300–400 endowed schools in all, several dozen of which were major institutions recruiting from a wide geographical range.

Alongside these, private schools of all kinds (trade, business and grammar) continued to flourish throughout this period. In different ways these all provided commercial or other occupational preparation, at a wide range of social levels. Many were short-lived serving particular markets or relying for their survival on the drive of individual teachers (Green 2009, 64, 58–59, 63). In contrast, the curriculum of the endowed grammar schools was much more stable. Humanist learning, whereby Greek was added to the curriculum of the better-resourced institutions was, like the study of Latin, also a Europe-wide cultural impetus and this started to influence grammar schooling in England from the 1480s, slowly extending what counted, in the upper forms of the schools by the mid-sixteenth century, as preparation for university (Briggs 2011, 241; Orme 2006, 119; Green 2009, 192–4). All grammar school learning was vocational, most was perceived as immediately practical and there was a continual updating of curriculum detail, serviced by textbooks written by the most enterprising teachers. However, as with other types of school, many that taught grammar were temporary, private affairs existing alongside those which were permanently endowed (*ibid.*, 98–101, 58–59).

Of great importance, then as later, was the relationship of the grammar schools to the universities and here there was much variation across the British Isles. For three centuries from the late-sixteenth century, the characteristic curriculum of the English grammar school was strongly influenced by (and in some cases tied to) a fundamentally conservative culture of student admissions and requirements at Oxford and Cambridge, probably reinforced by reverence on the part of some parents and ambition on the part of others (Green 2009, 84–6, 194). From the 1570s, both universities also recruited students on a significant scale from Wales, where there was no indigenous higher education, while in Ireland a similar exodus (among Anglicans) was partially stemmed by the creation of Trinity College Dublin in 1591 through private benefaction (Jenkins 2007, 137; Jones and Roderick 2003, 23–4; Atkinson 1969: 37). Meanwhile, the five Scottish universities in existence by 1593 existed predominantly to train pious and orthodox ministers for the reformed church, with the professoriate at these institutions being purged from time to time by both church and state (Anderson 1997, 12–14).

In comparison with the continent of Europe, where such education served mainly an aristocratic elite, the English grammar schools and universities had accommodated, during 1560–1640, a surge in sons of the landed gentry class and of the ‘middling sort’ of professional experts and merchants (Green 2009, 57–8, 76–7, 194). This was not maintained thereafter and the main tension to be accommodated within the overall structure of English post-elementary schooling, from the late-seventeenth century onwards, was the demand that it should cater for the interests of new social groups – dissenters and an expanding commercial class, most notably – who saw a need to develop new branches of useful school knowledge, scientific and practical, in the context of changing occupations and, later, rapid urbanisation (*ibid.*, 68, 300). The dynamic that resulted from this in England during the 150 years after 1690 was elaborate. The leading endowed schools retained the continuity of their links with the universities and undergraduate study, the most prestigious evolving into ‘great’ schools at the vanguard of the Victorian ‘public school’ movement. Other grammar schools with resources to spare broadened their curricula to embrace new subjects such as mathematics and English grammar, but many more ossified and became caught in spiral of a decline, often abandoning classics completely in the face of stiff competition from more

commercially-minded private establishments (Lawson and Silver 1973, 195–6, 251–2, 203–5). The latter included schools set up by non-conformists who, being barred from the two universities, also had to provide their own post-school academies which set students on courses of study parallel to, but culturally separate from, education at Oxford and Cambridge.

The impulses and effects of Victorian reform in the century and a half from c.1830

Prior to the reign of Victoria, schools across the British Isles had been self-regulating – as private enterprises, religious initiatives (schools run by dissenters being permitted in England and Wales from the 1660s and by Catholics in all four countries from 1782) or institutions endowed by wealthy individuals or bodies within the framework of charity law. However, the very rapid social and economic changes that were being brought about by large-scale industrialisation and its resulting politics had begun to place these arrangements under strain. Not only were there movements to broaden the base of education to embrace the majority of the labouring poor, but the fitness of post-elementary education was increasingly called into question by the national authorities. Among the most interesting kind of school – but least clear in the historical record and much neglected by scholars (Rothblatt 2007, 153–4) – was the private establishment. Most of these were ephemeral but, taken together at any one time, they had since before the reformation generated custom from a plethora of social groups, teaching girls as well as boys. Now they were gearing up further to serve a burgeoning middle-class.

At the level of the national authorities there were varied efforts to revitalise the endowed schools and the higher-level curriculum they had been founded to teach. It was in Ireland, still largely rural and severely impoverished, that commissions of enquiry were initiated first, during 1788–1809 in the immediate aftermath of Catholic emancipation. These inquiries found general decay: just 10 diocesan grammar schools were in good repair while among the seven Royal Schools teachers held sinecures and, in those institutions that had any pupils enrolled, more than 80% paid fees, despite the generous endowments enjoyed by the institutions they attended (Atkinson 1969, 30–2). Contemporary reports in England revealed a similar picture (Lawson and Silver 1973, 250–3), while in Wales 70 years later four schools accounted for two thirds of all secondary pupils in the country not attending private schools (Archer 1921, 291–2). Not all was lethargy, however. Catholics were establishing church schools in Ireland; in England and Wales, the fortunes of individual schools prospered under strong and committed leadership; and in all three countries, *laissez-faire* economics encouraged a lively private sector (Atkinson 1969, 112; Lawson and Silver 1973, 203–9, 302; Jones and Roderick 2003, 68). By contrast, the public provision of schools with an advanced curriculum was more systematic in Scotland at this time. During the eighteenth century the Scottish universities had not only broadened but also lowered their curricula such that a precocious boy aged 15 or 16 leaving either a rural parish school (in place in almost all of the lowland parishes by the 1690s) or a burgh school with basic Latin could with confidence aim for a university place – if he was prepared to imbibe the social conservatism and ‘polite’ manners of institutions which had turned their back on an Oxbridge-style residential experience in favour of what would today be

called 'access' to those boarding out or living at home and who were deemed able to benefit (Anderson 1997, 5, 17–19; 1983, 4, 19).

This Scottish departure explains why, when commissioners in all four countries set about reforming endowed schools in earnest, between 1864 and 1885, the established pattern in Scotland required least overhaul. The Argyll Commission, based in Edinburgh during 1855–1858, found there to be 54 burgh schools but also very many private 'middle-class schools'. Almost all provided education only to the age of 16, the Scottish universities having taken over the role left to the senior forms of grammar schools in other European countries (Scotland 1969a, 209; Anderson 1997, 18, 34). From 1872 the leading burgh schools were transferred to school boards where they continued to charge fees and sat alongside a diminished but more exclusive private sector, especially in Edinburgh where the professional elite was accustomed to sifting the social gradations of competing schools (Anderson 1983, 20–2; 1997, 35). In 1892, state subsidies to the secondary schools managed by the boards were introduced and these, alongside reform of endowments and their use, allowed an active policy to be pursued over the five decades from 1903 to bring about a universal pattern of transfer at the age of 12 (the 'clean cut'), for girls as well as for boys, from elementary schools (the old parish schools, most shorn of their advanced teaching) to state-supported secondary schools (still fee-charging, but now extending their age-group upward, to satisfy university reformers) (Anderson 1997: 36, 49–50).

This overall path was to be followed, at different speeds, in the other three countries. In Ireland, entrenched rival control over secondary education by the churches forestalled any effective state intervention into the running of secondary schools. Indeed, six official commissions, committees and enquiries had sat between 1788 and 1870 but none could overcome the hostility of the two denominations to any weakening of their authority such as would be brought about by the creation of publicly-funded secondary schools (Atkinson 1969, 30, 32, 109–11, 114). By 1871 there were 186 catholic schools managed, variously, by the dioceses, male religious orders and convents along with 69 protestant endowed schools all run on humanist grammar-school lines, to which may be added the various private institutions that served the urban middle-class and tenant farmers. Subsidies to all types of schools were made possible by legislation in 1878 but through a means (payment by results) which ensured no interference with the freedom of the denominations to govern and manage their schools. In 1905 only one in 10 pupils were thought to be completing all grades, mainly because the curriculum was weighted strongly towards the highest attaining pupils in the classical subjects, based on the funding available through the statute of 1878 which rewarded success in such examinations. This impasse was still unresolved at the partition of Ireland in 1921 (Coolahan 1981, 53–67, 72–3).

In Wales, the Taunton Commission found that there were, in 1868, 16 classical grammar schools and a further eight teaching above the elementary level. Thirteen years later a specifically Welsh inquiry, the Aberdare Commission, concluded that the 27 endowed schools operating effectively in the whole of Wales were all small. Three were for girls, 13 were in the largely rural north and only three could be said to be thriving. Alongside the endowed schools they found three proprietary schools (i.e., subscription-based and promoted by companies), all in the south, 79 mainly small private schools for boys 'of a commercial character' attracting custom

from the middle-class, tradesman, business people and farmers, and 73 private schools for girls (Jones and Roderick 2003, 66, 100; Davies 1973, 54; Archer 1921, 291). In its parallel work on the situation in England, the Taunton Commissioners reported that there were, in 1868, 382 endowed foundations that could be regarded as 'grammar schools' teaching the classics, many of which were small. Alongside these were eleven nationally-renowned schools already scrutinised by a separate commission, an unspecified number of proprietary schools which the commissioners chose not to examine, over 2,500 other schools with endowments (of which 332 were non-classical but teaching above elementary level) and, they estimated, more than 10,000 private schools run by individuals for profit (Archer 1921, 83; Maclure 1969, 90; Jones and Roderick 2003, 66). The size of these figures, coupled with the much greater average value of the endowments uncovered by the commissioners in England, served to emphasise the relative poverty of the other countries, especially Ireland and Wales.

The *laissez-faire* organisation of schooling that prevailed in Ireland, Wales and England above the level of elementary instruction began to come under state control first in Wales where, in 1889, legislation led to the creation of 64 new 'Intermediate' (or 'County') schools and a near-doubling of pupils receiving advanced instruction in the decade from 1890 (MoE 1949, 1). From 1902, newly created local education authorities in both Wales and England were (unlike their Scottish school board counterparts) permitted to establish new secondary schools and to take over others in existence. Wales had a head-start in this respect: by 1902 the number of intermediate secondary schools had grown to 93. Almost half of the pupils were girls and girls went on to outnumber boys by 1918 (Jones and Roderick 2003, 117; Evans 1990, 120–30). Once Northern Ireland was incorporated into a reconstituted United Kingdom in 1922, its minister of education signalled an immediate commitment to much closer conformity with British practice, including the creation of local education authorities and this instigated a delicate process of encouraging church-managed secondary schools to transfer to local government control under guarantee of separate denominational status and identity (Atkinson 1969, 177–84; GNI 1964, 6–8).

By these means – alignment in Northern Ireland after 1922 to structures operating in England and Wales since 1902 – coupled in Scotland with developments since the mid-nineteenth century which suggested the influence of Anglicising tendencies (Anderson 1983, 25–6, 60, 342–3), provision of advanced instruction in UK state-maintained schools in the early twentieth century was set on a broadly common path toward 'secondary education for all' after 1945. To understand fully how this post-war realisation was shaped, three important themes embedded in the reforms and mentalities of Victorian era are now traced over the century and a half to c.1980.

'Merit' and the rise of examinations

Perhaps the most important balance that secondary schools across the British Isles had to achieve in the century after 1830 was to accommodate ideals of merit with the educational requirements of a burgeoning middle-class. The way in which this was achieved was through the introduction of competitive-entry examinations, linked to broader debates about the nature of virtue and talent and how they should be fostered through secondary schooling.

First, a rising tide of formal tests began to seep into a range of Victorian institutions, in the form of competitive-entry examinations (for example, to the Indian Civil Service, from 1854, and the Home Civil Service, from 1870) and in examinations set by universities designed to test the knowledge of pupils in schools. In England these latter were 'the Locals', inaugurated by Oxford in 1858 as a means to raise standards in the grammar schools. At their launch they were known as the 'middle-class' examinations and led to the placing candidates in a rank 'order of merit', based on the marks obtained. By the mid-1860s, they were being taken up by private secondary schools (serving both girls and boys) and by all but the most prestigious of the endowed schools. However, the leading endowed schools and middle-class 'public schools' schools of newer foundation largely ignored both the Locals and the entry procedures at London University, founded in 1836 and requiring no religious test. Instead, they continued to secure places for their pupils at the two ancient universities *via* recommendation, *via* school-based examinations especially created for them by the two universities from 1874 or *via* the sitting of scholarship examinations set separately by the various Oxbridge colleges where required knowledge of Greek served to limit the pool of potential candidates (Roach 1971, 85, 87–8, 233–4, 237, 240–1; Montgomery 1965, 6, 150)

In Ireland, the Oxford and Cambridge 'Locals' were also used by the church secondary schools, along with examinations set by Trinity College, Dublin. Following the legislation of 1878, subject-based examinations were nationalised and came to comprise the sole means by which secondary schools could receive public funds in a manner acceptable to their church governors, *via* fees based on results achieved. As a result, from 1879 up to and beyond the partition of Ireland in 1921, the curriculum was moulded by external regimes of assessment with marks in the classical subjects given most weighting in the early years, and the public awaiting the annual published results of each school with intense interest (Raftery and Parkes 2007, 73–4, 83; Kealy 2007, 83–4; Coolahan 1981, 61–3). Similarly, examinations loomed large in Scotland. Middle-class parents (then, as now) sought an education which equipped their sons for the professions (medicine, for example, became a graduate entry profession in Scotland in 1858) and for British jobs such as those in the civil service, while within the universities reformers sought to raise the age of admittance from 15 or 16 to 17 or 18 on the basis of rigorous entry qualifications. The former aim was addressed through the introduction of Scottish 'Locals' by Edinburgh and St Andrews in 1865; the latter aim was achieved in 1892 when university matriculation became aligned with a school-leaving examination taken at the age of 17, designed to sort for university entry (Anderson 1997, 31–3, 38; Rothblatt 2007, 125; Gray et al. 1983, 49). Meanwhile, across the British Isles new universities and university colleges were being created (in England from the 1830s, in Ireland from the 1850s, in Wales from the 1870s and in Scotland from the 1880s) to sit alongside the eight ancient institutions and this provided a further impetus for secondary schools to enter candidates for external examinations.

While the subjects set had an important influence over the curriculum taught in schools, more significant in the long run were Victorian ideas as to who examinations were for, what they tested and what they could not measure. One of the chief promoters of competitive examinations for the civil service, Thomas Babington Macaulay, referred in speeches at various times during the 1830s–1850s to the task incumbent on the nation of identifying 'talent', 'diligence', 'superior powers'

and 'intelligence', while Frederick Temple, headmaster at Rugby, spoke in 1865 of pupils of 'real ability' being identifiable on a 'scale of intellect' (Sutherland 1984, 98–9, 104). Commissioners appointed to review the endowed schools in England and Wales wrote a couple of years later of the 'ability' of some pupils, the 'clever scholars' who continue to study Latin, some of whom should be admitted by scholarships open to 'merit'. In proposing competitive entry to the Home Civil Service Stafford Northcote envisaged, in 1854, an examination 'so conducted as to test the intelligence, as well as the mere attainments, of the candidates' (ibid., 106, 100).

Such generalised ideas might have exerted only a diffuse policy influence over the organisation of schools had not Francis Galton, a scholar with private means based in London, published *Hereditary Genius* in 1869. This essay became hugely influential, in due course inaugurating a worldwide science of psychometrics which still flourishes. In his essay Galton took Macaulay's loose terms and proposed a concept of 'ability' that fused character, intellect and disposition. Prestigious examinations would be a measure of this but so, too, considered Galton, would be worldly success based upon 'a great deal of very laborious work'. The strain in this thinking that emphasised heredity reflected the influence on Galton of social Darwinism, while that which laid stress on effort chimed with powerful ideals energising the English public schools (both endowed and proprietary) – schools that emerged strengthened from the work of the Taunton Commission of 1864–1868, which were becoming the nurseries for those who would administer Britain's empire overseas and which were emulated on a small scale in Scotland, Wales and Ireland (Sutherland 1984, 34–9, 113; Szreter 1996, 132; Anderson 1983, 20; Percival 1969, 92).

In this way two important concepts were fused. The first, strongly influenced by Scottish enlightenment thinking (and reflected there in patterns of access to higher education), led Macaulay to envisage a society based on merit *via* the identification of 'ability'. This, it was assumed, was unequally distributed across the population and was something that competitive examinations could help establish and codify. The second outlook, more English in its tenor, was designed to maintain a different kind of social structure, a Platonic hierarchy of secondary schools stratified formally into three tiers and broadly corresponding to one strand of contemporary thinking about the structure of social class (Sutherland 1984, 115; Szreter 1994, 160, 163; McCulloch 2007, 15–6; Cannadine 2000, 73–103). With Irish and Welsh secondary education remaining severely impoverished in the mid-nineteenth century, it was this fusion of Anglo-Scottish ideas about merit and social hierarchy, soon to be overlaid by a new technology of 'ability' measures, that created the tensions, points of energy and fault lines across which the expansion of secondary school provision throughout the British Isles, both state-sponsored and private, would be plotted in the twentieth century.

The immediate effect was that Scottish Enlightenment ideas of selection through intellectual merit became bent in England to a model of social hierarchy in which, initially at least, 'character' came to be prized above examination grades. In this process, the unusually high degree of self-regulation of the English universities was an important factor ensuring, among other things, that the definition of merit and ability – and their relation to character – would continue to be worked out among the universities, public schools and reformed grammar schools on a *laissez-faire* basis, rather than through state intervention *via* a nationally regulated school leaving examination such as had been introduced in France or Prussia (Roach

1971, 12, 106, 253). In contrast, the continental model was followed in the other countries of the British Isles. In Ireland national examinations were managed from 1879 by an Intermediate Board of commissioners answerable, ultimately, to the government (Parkes 2010, 60–1). In Edinburgh the official Leaving Certificate, introduced by the Scottish Education department from 1888 and from the management of which the Scottish universities were excluded, was designed to achieve much higher and more universal academic standards as well as direct government influence over what was to be taught (Anderson 1983, 206–7). At first the Certificate comprised separate subjects but in 1902 it became a ‘grouped’ award, mainly to dampen the tendency, similar to that already apparent in Ireland, of highly competitive schools submitting candidates early in separate subjects in order, later, to publish prodigious results (Scotland 1969b, 69). Notwithstanding, the key feature of the Leaving Certificate (the ‘higher’ being the middle of three grades that could be attempted) was its close alignment to the entry requirements of the universities with their emphasis on literary preparation (*ibid.*, 74–82; Gray, McPherson, and Raffe 1983, 49). The Scottish pattern was closely emulated in Wales through the Welsh Central Board, set up in 1895 with powers both to inspect the new intermediate secondary schools and to provide them with examinations leading to a grouped award (Jones and Roderick 2003, 92, 119–20; Montgomery 1965, 63). It was under the influence of the Scottish and Welsh schemes that the Board of Education in London introduced the School Certificate across England and Wales in 1918. The Higher ‘School Cert’ was also a grouped award from the outset but, characteristically, in England it remained under the control of the universities, *via* the seven separate boards which they were supervising between them at this date (Jones and Roderick 2003, 92, 119–20; Montgomery 1965, 132–5; Bruce 1969, 74–86; Roach 1979, 51). On the one hand, in all four countries the new national certificates allowed state-funded secondary schools to complete for university entry more effectively alongside the private schools; on the other, the power of the awards to dominate the work in schools was soon evident and being decried (Coolahan 1981, 65–6; Scotland 1969b, 70; Jones and Roderick 2003, 93; Banks 1955, 93–4).

The growth of selective secondary schools and the measurement of ‘ability’

The creation of national ‘grouped’ certificates was both an engine and a reflection of the growth of state-sponsored secondary education in Britain from the 1890s. It also heralded a key feature of twentieth century provision across the four UK nations as the ambition and reach of state-sponsored places grew: the nexus between examinations, curricula and the measurement of ability.

Overall, the pattern of state-sponsored expansion was strikingly similar across the four countries even if, up to 1939, the administration of publicly-funded education beyond the level of elementary schooling was complex and opaque. The basic structure was as follows. Throughout the British Isles by 1900 charity commissioners had supervised numerous local schemes to reform the use of school endowments, supplemented by fees, such that the grammar/burgh school tradition was enlarged and revitalised, educationally and financially, and now provided for girls as well as for boys. Alongside these sat church secondary schools and a similarly dynamic and energised private sector that, together, had revitalised girls’ secondary education from the 1850s. All of these schools had prestige and serviced the more

affluent tier of a rapidly expanding urban middle class, concentrating on English, the classics and mathematics. In the process, the centuries-old eclecticism of numerous small private schools was rationalised. In Scotland and Wales the number of private day schools was much diminished by this mix of private and public intervention, in Ireland they were squeezed by the growth of church schools offering an advanced curriculum, while in England the fee-paying sector remained proportionately large, reshaping having been led by boarding schools of increased size being accorded the highest status.

How could this curriculum be extended to those with less means, on what scale and *via* what form of entry procedures? These questions preoccupied governments and local authorities in the first half of the twentieth century. The response was broadly common, with local variation. In Edinburgh, it was decided that, from 1872, school boards in Scotland should be permitted to take over the management of charitably endowed and church schools in their area, if those schools agreed. In London, when local authorities were created in 1902 it was decided to allow the limited establishment by the authorities of new schools designated 'secondary' (in Wales, to run in parallel with the recently created intermediate secondary schools). As in Scotland, these authorities could also take over charitably endowed and church schools in their area, if such agreements could be reached. From 1923 in Scotland and from 1926 in England and Wales, the endowed and church schools could only receive state support from a local authority or central government (rather than from both) and this led 247, including many of the most academic, to become 'direct-grant' schools (i.e., receiving most of their non-fee income via grants issued by central government) (Scotland 1969b, 62–4, 71–3; PSC I: 47–8, III: 36–37, 235). Meanwhile, in 1921, a new Ministry of Education in Belfast assumed responsibility for the catholic and protestant secondary schools in the six counties of Ulster. However, such was the reluctance of the churches to cede control, that only nine out of 75 such schools were transferred to local authority management over the next 25 years (GNI 1964, 9). Through this pattern of parallel development across the UK it was these schools which, by the 1920s, formed the corpus of a reconstituted 'grammar school' sector – the loose term widely applied in England, Wales and Northern Ireland – alongside, in Scotland, schools providing 'senior secondary' courses.

In tandem with these institutional developments ran the evolving secondary school curriculum. In Ireland, Wales and England there were concerted efforts between 1902 and 1904 to secure a recasting of what was taught. In Ireland all that could be attempted procedurally by the state was a rebalancing of the subject-weighting through which incentive-payments based on examination success were passed to church-run schools. An attempt was duly made to modernise the subject-mix away from a predominantly classical diet. However, poor facilities in the schools and professional hostility from heads' associations blocked change, such as the development of grouped awards designed to give greater prominence to 'modern' subjects including science. The result was that, at partition, the Ulster secondary schools (all described at the time as being impoverished) transferred to Northern Ireland with a literary, classical curriculum still to the fore (Coolahan 1981, 66–9; Hyland 1987, 10–1).

In Wales and England the curriculum in a slowly growing sector of publicly-funded secondary schools was the responsibility of the new local education authorities under guidance from the Board of Education and its inspectorate

(including, in Wales, the separate inspectorate for intermediate schools supervised by the Central Welsh Board). Here, as in Ireland, much teacher opinion was conservative and a drift in favour of science was resisted in preference for a revival of literary studies (whether classical or modern) (Banks 1955, 37–50). In Wales, separate curriculum regulations were instituted from 1907 but these merely allowed ‘slight differences’ from England, namely native language instruction of this largely literary diet ‘in districts where Welsh is spoken’ (Jones 1990, 156–7). Only in Scotland was science insisted upon within the grouped Leaving Certificate, from 1908, and only at the lower grade so as to ensure the teaching of a course of general education suitable for those leaving at 15/16. Thereafter, for students preparing for the higher grades leading to university entrance, there was no such requirement to balance ‘the linguistic and the realistic sides of intellectual discipline’ (Anderson 1983, 238).

Ensuring also that the traditional offering of languages and mathematics would remain the key to the secondary school curriculum was the reinforcement this received from the development of intelligence testing and its use in selection for entry to secondary school. When the first such tests were devised in Paris by Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon during 1908–1911, they had been concerned that these batteries should measure higher mental processes in a way separate from the school attainment tests of the time (Sutherland 1984, 115–7, 123–7). In England and Scotland, where such tests were most used before 1945, they came to sit alongside subject examinations and interviews in the procedures for secondary selection administered by the local authorities. Thus, from 1911, authorities such as Liverpool, Bradford and Northumberland approached psychologists about the refinement of mental tests for this purpose, the result being the pioneering of their use in Bradford, in 1919, followed by the publication nationally, in 1921, of two trial examples mixing verbal, spatial and numerical items, an overall approach endorsed by the Board of Education the next year (*ibid.*, 133–40; Gordon 1980, 203). Following this lead, a majority of local education authorities in England (perhaps c.70%–75%) were, by 1939, supplementing the scholarship exams which they supervised (comprising written papers, interviews and orals) with mental tests of various kinds (Sutherland 1984, 151–2, 189, 299; Gordon 1980, 197–200). In contrast, while the Welsh county and municipal grammar schools were also selective there was, it seems, markedly less enthusiasm there for supplementing written subject papers with mental testing, while in Northern Ireland in the 1930s it was still the ability to pay fees that mattered most (Sutherland 1984, 267–8; Gallagher and Smith 2000, para. 1.1.1).

Despite these variations, the principle of selection by ability for secondary education won all-party political support across Britain in the inter-war period as refining and making better designed the ‘ladder’ of opportunity or the ‘sieving’ of candidates by which the deserving – those with talent and ability – could proceed *via* a scientifically-endorsed selection procedure to local authority secondary schools. Moreover, there was a gradual standardisation of aspects of the entry process. In the early years of the century the varied types of scholarship examination set in England and Wales were taken by candidates ranging in age from 10 to 14. However, by the early 1920s the majority age of would-be entrants had settled at ‘11-plus’ while, from the late 1920s, it was standard for the results to be compiled by the local authorities as candidate lists headed the ‘Order of Merit’, in emulation of the Oxford and Cambridge ‘locals’ of the late-1850s (Sutherland

1984, 107, 287–8, 159, 170–1; Gordon 1980, 209, 217; Roach 1971, 237). The method was no less appealing in Scotland where, indeed, nineteenth century political ideas in England about merit had originated (*ibid.*, 99–100; Sreter 1994, 160–1). In 1930s Scotland selection procedures evoked the eighteenth century ideal, and to a large extent practice, of access to university on merit from burgh and parish schools, regardless of a pupil's background. This was reinforced by the implementation in 1932 of a 'mental survey' of the entire cohort of 10- to 11-year-olds (87,498 children on a single day in June, repeated with a new sample in 1947) and a long tradition of prominence into the 1960s – in Scotland and England – accorded to tests designed at the Moray House college of education in Edinburgh (Deary et al. 2000; Rothblatt 2007, 222–3).

Meanwhile, although the English public schools had devised their own entry examination at 13+ (the Common Entrance, from 1904), 'character', assessed via interview, still exerted a strong hold. Only in the 1950s did the codes of honour and gentlemanly conduct that Thomas Arnold had established at Rugby in the 1830s, and which had been widely emulated across selective secondary education for a century afterwards, now seem out of step with an increasingly scientific post-war world in which women as well as men sought a university education, followed by a career. In response, leaders in grammar and public schools began to emphasise 'excellence' in education as the best preparation for leadership in what was now being termed a 'meritocratic' age (McCulloch 1991, 74–97).

The place of technical/practical education in the secondary school years

A third theme central to the development of UK secondary education from the 1890s onwards concerned the place of technical and practical education.

In this sphere the crucial British decisions were those taken in the civil services of London in 1902 and Edinburgh in 1903. These sought to establish clear boundaries among state-funded schools between 'true' secondary education for a minority in specialist institutions and recognition of a need to continue expansion of school education for the remainder among the 12–14+ age group in subordinate schools (Anderson 1983, 228–30). The way this was managed up to 1939 was administratively complicated due to the political pressures generated within local government for a blurring of this hard line coupled, after 1922, by persistent financial pressures under which the central government had to operate.

In addition to the ubiquitous local 'elementary' school, prior to 1902 local school boards in England, Scotland and Wales had established 'higher grade' schools to meet the demand for upper-elementary education and, after 1903, there was also added to these 'central' schools (in all three countries) alongside 'higher elementary' schools and 'junior technical' schools (in England and Wales). As we have seen, Wales had also developed after 1890 a nationwide network of 'intermediate' schools while, after 1923, 'intermediate technical' schools were initiated in Northern Ireland. As a result, the type of school a motivated child from a poorer home might attend after the age of 12 depended on what the local authority concerned had decided to provide, with varying degrees of choice being available in towns and cities. Moreover, the resources available to each type of school varied depending on its formal administrative designation ensuring that there would, overall, be subtle gradations of status for both teachers and pupils, and varied aims in terms of occupational preparation and access to national certificates

on the completion of a course of study. From an administrative point of view, the intermediate schools in Northern Ireland were 'elementary' and had limited (two-year) practical and technical aims, whereas those in Wales were, in essence, fully secondary in ethos, curriculum (literary and classical) and associated trappings, but were administered separately from the secondary schools that local authorities could adopt or create. The higher grade schools in England and Wales were redesignated 'secondary' after 1902 and known locally as 'grammars', while in Scotland a minority of this type were redesignated from 1923 where they were known as 'academies'. Some central schools had highly selective entry and developed a strong secondary ethos, but all were formally 'elementary', while the higher elementary and junior technical schools of England and Wales had nomenclature that confirmed their subordinate, lesser-funded status (NGI 1964, 7; Scotland 1969b, 56–9, 70–1; Richardson and Wiborg 2010, 4–6; Gordon 1980, 219; Jones and Roderick 2003, 92–3, 118–9, 149).

This incrementalism across Britain testified both to a demand in society for extended schooling beyond the basic curriculum available to all and, up to the mid-1930s, to the reluctance of any of the national authorities to concede that most of this it should be thought of as secondary education proper. It also ensured that notions of what mass secondary education was and might contain – including its practical, commercial and technical components – had no key locus for development (McCulloch 1998, 11–26). Thus, while entries of candidates to the School Certificate/Leaving Certificate in commercial and technical subjects were officially encouraged in all four countries, they remained very small (Coolahan 1981, 88; Scotland 1969b, 81; Jones and Roderick 2003, 92–4; Banks 1955, 92). Moreover, as we have seen, the procedures for secondary school selection used by the local authorities, including mental tests, laid emphasis on the traditional core of language and mathematics. And when Northern Ireland joined a reconstituted United Kingdom in 1922, pledged to align its provision of education with 'British democratic ideas', the impoverished state of advanced instruction outside the grammar schools comprised merely a few day trade preparatory schools although, thereafter up to 1939, an extensive network of two-year intermediate technical schools was developed (Atkinson 1969, 183; Coolahan 1981, 91; Richardson and Wiborg 2010, 8–9).

The Education Acts passed in Scotland in 1936 and 1945, in England and Wales in 1944 and in Northern Ireland in 1947 all declared that there should be universal transfer from a 'primary' to a 'secondary' stage of education for all school pupils at the age of 11 (12 in Scotland). These statutes ushered in a period of 20 years in which the structure of secondary education across the UK would be closely aligned and one in which, in each country, there were decisions to be made about the characteristics and curricula that should shape the education of pupils who would now be compelled to remain at school until the age of 15 (from 1947 in England, Wales and Scotland, and 1957 in Northern Ireland). This made urgent the question of what would occur in the new schools labeled 'secondary modern' (England and Wales), 'junior secondary' (Scotland) and 'secondary intermediate' (Northern Ireland) as well as – outside Scotland – what would be the defining nature of secondary education in specialist technical schools.

When it came to the appropriate allocation of pupils to the new types of school, the varied formal guidance provided to local authorities reflected both the patterning of the upper elementary/secondary divide established prior to 1939 and experience derived from mental testing during the inter-war period. In Scotland it

was considered that 30% of the cohort would benefit from selective secondary education but, by 1958, the figure realised for entrants at the age of 12 was 38%. Meanwhile, authorities in England and Wales had been advised to set aside between 20% and 25% of places for selective entry and, by 1961, the equivalent figures to that in Scotland (12-year-olds in attendance) were 27% (Wales) and 21% (England). In Northern Ireland, where there had been no pre-war tradition of secondary selection bar a tiny number of very competitive scholarships, 42% of pupils in were in selective schools in 1964 (Gray, McPherson, and Raffe 1983, 50, 335; MoE 1962, 15, 17; GNI 1964, 56).

Thus, by the late 1950s there was significant disparity in the proportion of pupils receiving a grammar/'senior secondary' school education in the four countries, as well as across local authorities within each (in one Welsh authority before the war 60% were already attending a grammar school and, after 1945, local proportions across England and Wales varied from 10% to 50%: MoE 1949, 1; Rothblatt 2007, 220). Nevertheless, the extension of selection testing across the UK (now including Northern Ireland: Sutherland 1973, 22–3) *via* written subject papers and mental tests, typically in numerical and verbal reasoning, ensured that traditional subjects set the benchmark against which curricula in all types of secondary schools would be judged. Indeed, educational achievement had served from the beginning of IQ testing as an external criterion against which it could be validated. Consequently, in the 1950s when secondary school selection in the UK was at its most widespread, such tests were defended by their designers as a predictive instrument to help make selection fairer, the assertion being that children from all backgrounds would be identified who, because of their innate intelligence, were likely to excel in attainment tests based on the grammar/senior secondary school curriculum (Mackintosh 1998, 131, 24). In these circumstances it was hardly surprising that it proved extremely difficult for educators to conceive of ability as separate from a hierarchy of secondary school subjects ranked by perceived centrality and/or difficulty.

This trend was strengthened, also, at the leaving stage since the GCE A level examination, introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland from 1951 as a replacement for the School Certificate, turned the spotlight firmly on attainment in individual subjects as the route to university places that were now becoming more sought after and harder to access (Rothblatt 2007, 125, 130). The GCE was not adopted in Scotland, but in the same year the 'higher' grade of the Leaving Certificate was similarly modified so as to allow the award of certificates in individual subjects (Gray, McPherson, and Raffe 1983, 52). Thus, in all four countries, patterns of increased specialisation in society at large had led to the simultaneous abandonment of school-leaving examinations designed as grouped awards.

Also clear by the early 1960s was a faltering of the experiment conducted in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to establish selective secondary technical schools (there was no tradition of this kind in Scotland either before or after 1945, see McPherson and Raab 1988, 73–4). Attendance at these schools in England and Wales peaked in 1954 at 4.9%, by which time their deficiencies were becoming clear: a strong preference on the part of most parents for grammar schools (selection to secondary technical schools comprised a 'second creaming'), employer indifference to institutions specialising in technology (which dated back to the junior technical schools at the start of the century) and the inability of these schools to develop a compelling educational rationale, not least because almost all

educational psychologists had concluded that there were no safe ways in which to identify technical aptitude in selection tests among ten year-olds. In Northern Ireland, also, the technical intermediates struggled and, although initially a strong numerical presence (comprising one sixth of secondary pupils in 1949–1950), most were absorbed formally during the 1960s into the further education colleges which, typically, already housed them (Simon 1991, 583; Richardson and Wiborg 2010, 6–7; Gallagher and Smith 2000, para. 1.1.2; Sutherland 1973, 22).

These developments in secondary selective education provided some limited help in scoping what might comprise mass secondary education in the schools that most young people now attended. By definition, this was an education for the child of ‘lower ability’. Beyond this, it was assumed there would be no need for examinations, a longstanding ideal in the education profession but something that parental pressure had overturned across Britain by the early 1960s (MoE 1960, 19; McPherson and Raab 1988, 359; in Northern Ireland parental opinion on this point was much more passive: Gallagher and Smith 2000, para. 2.2.3). In all four countries it was also considered that the best means of motivating these pupils would be to focus on the practical and experiential (BoE 1943, 20; McCulloch 1998, 131; McPherson and Raab 1988, 359; Gallagher and Smith 2000, para. 1.1.2). However, teacher supply to the secondary modern/junior-secondary schools was problematic across Britain (McCulloch 1998, 15–7) and success in bringing alive and making convincing a rationale for the kind of ‘reality’ curriculum ‘that makes sense’ to the pupil proved as elusive, overall, as had the ‘technical ethos’ aimed for in the secondary technical schools (McPherson and Raab 1988, 359; McCulloch 1998, 110, 129; McCulloch 1989, 110). The excitement of the ‘concrete’ curriculum envisaged in England and Wales, the ‘vocational impulse’ championed in Scotland and the ‘practical and cultural’ curriculum ‘with a genuine vocational bent’ envisaged in Northern Ireland (BoE 1943, 20; SED 1963, 24; GNI 1964, 28) never threatened to win for their schools the same confidence that conventional subject study commanded among those involved with the better resourced and more homogenous grammars and senior-secondaries. In practice, British secondary modern/junior-secondary/secondary intermediate schools varied significantly in their aims and methods based on an assessment of the clientele in each, although most attempted to follow official policy by teaching the academic subjects in a similar manner but to a lower level than in the selective schools (McCulloch 1998, 79; Scotland 1969b, 202). It was a practice hardly likely to win for them a persuasive identity. Moreover, they pursued these aims in a period when further education was expanding alongside buoyant youth employment and it was this very climate that led the shrewder among contemporary observers to become concerned about the future. For instance, complexities were anticipated once the existing bulge in primary schools of pupils from newly immigrant families had transferred to ‘slum schools with multiple problems’, where the prospect of employment on leaving school would probably be uncertain. This, concluded a ministry official in London in 1964, would confront teachers in non-selective secondary schools with ‘an almost super-human task’ (McCulloch 1998, 139–40).

If a lack of clarity and defining purpose was the inheritance bequeathed by non-selective secondaries to the comprehensive schools of Scotland, Wales and England after 1965, the new common schools would also have to accommodate the core assumptions and ideals of the minority of pupils able to achieve high grades in the traditional subject curriculum. Moreover, these minority assumptions and

ideals were, themselves, fundamentally vocational. Since the 1920s employers across Britain had been content to use first the School Certificate/Leaving Certificate and then the GCE examinations/single-certificate highers as a filter for entry to higher-level employment (Banks 1955: 93–4; McPherson and Raab 1988: 490–1), and across Britain since the late nineteenth century the summit of the secondary school curriculum had been defined by leaving examinations either controlled by higher education (in the case of the English university boards) or aligned with their entry requirements (in the case of the Welsh, Scottish and, later, the Northern Irish centralised boards) (Sutherland 1973: 20).

Individual subjects had fallen and risen but it was good grades in reliable subjects that mattered to middle-class parents and defined the terms on which they were prepared to engage, especially once the full employment of the post-war years began to falter in the early 1970s. In the years immediately prior to comprehensive reorganisation the independent schools, grammars and senior secondaries had recognised the parental insistence on reliable subjects when embracing the new mathematics and science promoted by the Nuffield Foundation. This helped to consolidate the move toward ‘excellence’ in pupil attainment on which the independent schools had embarked in the 1950s and, while it was insufficient to save the selective maintained schools in Britain, it was notable that in schools’ engagement both with ‘Nuffield science’ and with ‘Schools Council technology’ there was much concern lest ‘pure’ science be contaminated by the expertise of the craft departments or, worse still, become associated with occupational training (McCulloch, Jenkins, and Layton 1985, 159, 183, 192).

At the same time, the massive growth from the 1960s of A level/highers entries in individual subjects, themselves informally ranked in terms of admission to selective university courses and subsequent earnings (Richardson 2009, 22, n. 114) served to reinforce everyday assumptions about the relationship of intelligence, ability and merit that had been codified in the 1920s and 1930s, and consolidated in the 1950s. By 1980 the leading independent schools had successfully reinvented themselves along meritocratic lines (in terms of pupil attainment) and, as if to underscore all of these developments, they had just become the beneficiaries of a decision of the Labour government in 1975 to abolish the ‘direct-grant’ list, with the result that 143 of the 203 direct-grant schools in England, Wales and Scotland, including the most academic, transferred to an augmented independent, fee-paying sector.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed a long period in the development of secondary education in the British Isles. It concludes by assessing the significance of the key trends discussed for the situation in which the secondary schools found themselves c.1980.

The first conclusion is that, over the last eight centuries (at the least), schools providing advanced instruction have thrived when there was a good alignment between what they offered and what students and their parents wanted from them as a foundation for success in adulthood. Over the entire period a private sector responsive to this dynamic has existed alongside schools with permanent funding (through endowment) while, since 1890 starting in Wales, systematic state-sponsored expansion has led to a rationalisation of private schools and their diminishment outside England. Only in a few instances has the broad vocational

promise of these varied schools been found wanting or been overthrown. In the 1530s and 1560s, the monastic orders were dismantled and the particular occupational orientation of their schools became redundant; in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a majority of endowed schools ossified due to outdated governance and curricula; in the 1960s, selective grammar/senior secondary schools were unable to convince most in the wider society that their grip on certain vocational avenues should be allowed to continue. Moreover, for a great majority of the entire period the subject-based curricula of these different kinds of school have been, essentially, both practical and vocational.

The second conclusion is related. For over four centuries the secondary school curriculum has been strongly influenced by that of the old (pre-1600) universities. For most of this period admittance from one to the other was only semi-formal, but more systematic procedures evolved from the late 1850s (via the Oxford and Cambridge 'locals') and once nationally-coordinated examinations began, in 1879 starting in Ireland, requisite student ability has been defined in terms of attainment at school level in the main subjects followed by undergraduates, with competition intensifying in each successive generation. This hierarchy is one that employers have been content to endorse over the last century, with national subject examinations and degree awards being the main tools used to filter for entry to the labour market. From the 1920s, this framework began to be reinforced by the science of mental testing. This was widely used for selection to secondary education and for the differentiation of pupils within individual schools (initially in primaries and later in comprehensives), as well as for selection to employment. Furthermore, designers of such tests continue to assert that ability is closely related to intelligence and that this is most safely measured by mental reasoning tests, the results of which are very strong predictors of success in national examinations in the traditional school subjects.

Third, the provision by schools of advanced instruction to those pupils whose parents or sponsors sought it out, whether they paid or were remitted fees, was well established across a range of school-types in England by c.1200. As schooling expanded across the British Isles, this dynamic of supply and demand remained central until the UK legislation passed during 1944–1947. From then on, attendance was to be enforced on all pupils between the ages of 11/12 and 15 in exchange for free places (except in Northern Ireland and parts of Scotland). This initiated a major educational experiment, still continuing, as to what such compulsory state-funded provision might contain and how it might be brought alongside the time-honoured, university-inspired curriculum. At first, this alignment was attempted through differentiated secondary schools, but since the late 1960s (except in Northern Ireland and a few regions of England) the settlement required has been sought within comprehensive schools where it has been characterised by an uneasy mix of egalitarian and meritocratic impulses (Weeks 1986, 8, 133; Goodson 1983, 23; Bryce and Humes 1999). The latter have won out overall, assisted by streaming, banding or subject setting by ability, *via* test results or attainment scores (or both) (Weeks 1986, 83–90; Ball 1981, 29–34; Gray, McPherson, and Raffe 1983, 233). Moreover, from the mid-1970s, curriculum development projects aimed at occupational preparation became the default for pupils of 'lower ability', contrasted with merit that continued to be defined by high attainment in a 'core' of traditional subjects of evident vocational value in terms of delayed entry into advantageous adult employment after time spent at university.

In Northern Ireland the onset of 'The Troubles' in 1968–1969 served to reinforce division within the community along sectarian lines and stagnate a school structure in which control of secondary education by the churches was to remain prominent (Cannon 2003). In Scotland the will to make comprehensives succeed has been strengthened by appeals to an historic myth of democratic organisation in which intellect is respected and rewarded, based on breath of study (Anderson 1997, 17–19, 53–4; Gray, McPherson, and Raffe 1983 36–46, 309–15) and in Wales by appeal to the rallying cry of national self-determination and an identity separate from England (Jones and Roderick 2003, *passim*). Furthermore, in both Scotland and Wales nationalist politics, with its propelling logic of differentiation from England, has found it convenient to downplay the extent to which comprehensive re-organisation was sharply contested at the time (Anderson 1997, 51; Jones and Roderick 2003, 182–3). Meanwhile, in England, where middle-class anxieties about secondary education, its benefits and the role of the state were already deep-seated by the 1860s, it was prescient that secondary school heads should, in 1965, have anticipated with unease a situation years' hence in which better-off parents would 'seek accommodation in what they consider to be favoured areas', such that the aims of comprehensive schools would be frustrated and 'only house agents will have cause for joy' (McCulloch 2007, 15–7; 1998, 143).

That comprehensive re-organisation was widely contested across Britain in the 1960s and remains (in 2011) highly controversial in Northern Ireland serves to underscore the principal conclusion of this article – that patterns of secondary education across the British Isles over many centuries have had far more points of commonality than of difference.

Economic and social developments across the four neighbouring countries created similar frameworks of institutional provision for advanced education in schools. This occurred unevenly due to varied wealth in the local economy, influenced by the locus of political power and control. In the Anglo-Norman period, England urbanised most intensively, generated greatest wealth in its economy and exercised political aggression towards Ireland and Wales where, outside the monasteries, oral tradition in Gaelic and Welsh was central to formal education in what remained impoverished agrarian economies. Under such conditions the small number of grammar schools planted in both countries in the sixteenth century – teaching Latin in English – must have served as potent symbols of an alien culture (Jones and Roderick 2003, 17; Gillespie 1992, 44). However, even in these cases there was a clientele, pointing to the fact that from the period after which more than chance records survive (c.1200 in England and the fifteenth century elsewhere in the British Isles), the repeated story up to the 1940s is of schools with advanced curricula coming into being and surviving (or failing and being replaced) on a scale commensurate with the economies they served and where access to various occupations was accessible only to those with specific training.

Moreover, if it seems obvious to ascribe the broadly common pattern of development of such schools in England, Ireland and Wales to political power exercised by the English crown, the parallels between England and Scotland serve to counter-balance too strong an explanation of similarity derived from subjugation. Thus, notable in all four countries is development suggestive of shared understandings and aspirations in the wider culture: the influence of universities over the advanced curriculum in schools across the British Isles from the early seventeenth century; the tenacity of the classical curriculum in the endowed/burgh schools; the plethora

of private establishments providing advanced instruction; the expansion of secondary education in the nineteenth century to meet the needs and expectations of the burgeoning polite and commercial classes; concerted effort to expand secondary education for girls from the 1850s; the rise and dominance of examinations from the 1860s servicing new professions and providing for their recipients opportunities across Britain and in the empire; broadly simultaneous moves to reform the endowed schools (during 1864–1885); as secondary education continued to grow, widespread adoption of mental testing in selection procedures from the 1920s; UK-wide differentiation of parallel secondary schools after 1945; the abandonment of ‘grouped’ school-leaving awards from 1951; and extension of compulsion to the age of 16 in 1973–1974.

Within this broadly common framework there were, of course, some important variations and specific innovations. The Scottish universities exercised influence across Europe in the eighteenth century (and taught teenagers who, elsewhere, were still in school and comprised a narrower social group). The control of school leaving examinations in England by the universities (from the 1850s) was resisted elsewhere. Here, also, the ‘public’ and wider fee-paying sector of schools prospered as elsewhere it contracted. Church control gradually weakened except in Ireland where it intensified and was sustained. Ireland also saw the first rash, in the 1880s, of inter-school competition based on eagerly-consumed lists of the published grades awarded in public examinations. Wales pioneered the creation of state-managed secondary schools in the 1890s. Specialist technical schools were never attempted in Scotland. Northern Ireland retained selection to grammar schools at 11 after 1965.

However, in the final analysis it is the shared characteristics that trump expressions of difference. As in other aspects of society and culture, the United Kingdom was, and is, fundamentally united through its secondary education, but in complex ways.

Notes on contributor

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