

"Shaping Welsh Education: The Impact of Education Acts from 1870 to 1944"

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Gwlad, Gwlad: Aspects of Welsh History 1200 to the present day

Paper 2

The Education Acts spanning 1870-1944 profoundly shaped the landscape of schooling in Wales, yet their impact on achieving 'full attendance' was multifaceted and contingent upon various socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. This paper critically examines the successes and limitations of these legislative measures in achieving universal attendance, considering socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. While these Acts aimed to address educational disparities and promote cultural identity challenges such as regional disparities and religious tensions persisted. By exploring the complexities of these Acts, this study seeks to provide insights into their effects on Welsh education and their implications for broader societal transformations.

Before the 1870 Education Act, educational provision in Wales was fragmented and often inadequate, particularly in rural areas and among the working classes. The dominance of the Church of England in educational matters meant that Nonconformist communities, which constituted a significant portion of the Welsh population, often faced challenges in accessing education that aligned with their religious beliefs.

The 1870 Education Act brought improved education to the working classes not so much at their own demand as at the behest of the middle and upper classes. Many middle-class people hoped that improved education of the lower orders would reduce drunkenness or crime or both. It might achieve this positively by educating children in self-restraint, negatively at least by taking the street arabs into school. Another argument was political. Now that many working men had been given the vote under the 1867 Reform Act it was felt necessary to 'educate our masters'.^[1]

When deliberating over the Education Acts, there was a prevalent belief that widespread education would decrease crime rates. However, upon recent examination of judicial statistics, it appears there

may not be substantial evidence to support this assertion. Comparing data from the periods of 1871-76 and 1876-81 reveals an increase in crime rather than a decrease. Heavy-indictable offences saw a rise of approximately 4 to 5 percent, with minor offences experiencing an even greater increase. Moreover, the number of individuals committed to prison notably surged over the last five years.

Controversially while there was a decrease in the incarceration of young criminals during this time, instances of petty larcenies actually grew rather than diminished. Particularly revealing were the statistics concerning reformatories. Although there was a slight uptick in commitments to these institutions, the ages of those admitted had increased, and upon admission, they were found to possess higher levels of education. Similarly, industrial schools, which served partially as detention centres for juvenile offenders, witnessed a trend toward older boys.

Rowland Hamilton wrote at the time "Well it is possibly too premature to fully assess the impact of the 1870 Education Act on crime current figures, especially those pertaining to reformatories and industrial schools, suggest a rise in educated juvenile criminals. This leads to the conclusion that mere education of children may not suffice; it is imperative to aid them in securing honest livelihoods. While discharged prisoners receive support from the Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society and emigrants are assisted by emigration agents upon arrival abroad, boys who have received education up to a certain point are often left to navigate the world without guidance or assistance, potentially reinforcing the adage that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." [2] This opinion was a criticism that pointed to the issue of how an increased education rate alone would not be enough to pull a large amount of the population out of squalor.

However, despite this, the 1870 Education Act was generally welcomed in Wales for its ambitious goal

of providing elementary education for all children. Many saw the Act as an opportunity to address the glaring educational inequalities that had long plagued Welsh society. The Act's provision for the establishment of locally elected school boards was seen as a positive step towards increasing community involvement and ensuring greater access to education, especially in rural areas where schools were scarce.

Additionally, Language and cultural considerations played a significant role in shaping the Welsh response to the 1870 Education Act. The Welsh language held deep cultural and historical significance, particularly in rural communities where it was the primary means of communication. Some Welsh speakers expressed concerns about the Act's potential to undermine the Welsh language, fearing that English-language instruction would erode the linguistic heritage of Wales. Nevertheless, the Act did include provisions for the teaching of Welsh where there was sufficient demand, offering some reassurance to Welsh language advocates.

Despite its positive reception, other issues with the 1870 Education Act faced challenges and criticisms in Wales. Implementation issues, such as insufficient funding and inadequate infrastructure, hindered the Act's effectiveness in addressing educational disparities, particularly in remote and impoverished areas. Moreover, debates over the Act's religious provisions and language policies continued to simmer, reflecting deeper divisions within Welsh society.

Religion was another key factor influencing Welsh attitudes towards the 1870 Education Act. Nonconformist communities, which comprised a substantial portion of the Welsh population, welcomed the Act's secular approach to education and its emphasis on non-denominational schooling. They saw the Act as an opportunity to break the Church of England's monopoly on education and

promote religious diversity in schools. However, there were concerns about the Act's continued support for Church of England schools, particularly in areas where Nonconformity was strong. As a result of the denominational distance from the favoured Established Church and its schools, major state intervention in the form of the Education Acts of 1870 and 1902 caused considerable perturbation in Welsh religious circles. The 1902 Education Act, particularly, produced something of a constitutional crisis as all but two of the Welsh local authorities refused to administer the Act. This 'Welsh Revolt' has been studied in some detail, but there has been no large-scale study of the interrelationship between religion and education in Wales.[3]

David Lloyd George argued that government speakers incited county councils to break the law by sending poor little children to badly lighted and badly ventilated (Church) schools, but he also charged the government itself with illegality in requiring inspectors to modify their reports so that Church Schools should not lose the grant. 'Was that carrying out the law? For years the Board of Education had been breaking the law, and now, forsooth, these chronic lawbreakers, whose normal standard of running the administration of the country was breaking the law, came and said, "The Welsh County Councils are breaking the law. Stamp them out!" What virtue! They had got to come with clean hands first of all !' There was more than a grain of truth in Lloyd George's charges of partisan administration of the Education Acts, but he was palpably overstating his case.[4]

The Report of the Departmental Committee to Inquire into Intermediate and Higher Education in Wales from 1881, more usually referred to as the Aberdare Report, highlighted the severe shortage of secondary school places in Wales and recommended the introduction of an intermediate tier of education. By 1896, three categories of school catered for valleys children: intermediate schools, also called County Schools, offered places up to the age of 18 and prepared boys and girls for the public

examinations of the Central Welsh Board secondary or higher-grade schools offered a science-based curriculum targeted at children who were academically less able elementary schools provided a basic education from the ages of three to 15. The Aberdare Report recommended that intermediate schools should make provision for the education of boys and girls.

In 1884, Miss E. P. Hughes, a leading figure in Welsh and English educational circles and a founding member of the Association for Promoting the Education of Girls in Wales, commented that 'in England, the chief work has been to enable women to share the educational advantages of men, but in Wales, we have to create a higher education system for both sexes'. Between 1886 and 1901 the Association for Promoting the Education of Girls in Wales played an active and important role in protecting the interests of girls in the planned legislation and in the implementation of the Act itself. At the first annual meeting held in Cardiff in 1887, the society reported a membership of over 300 including many of the leading educational figures of the day. The membership lists not only testify to the broad support for the Association in Wales but also to the links that were established between the Welsh and English campaigns for the secondary education of girls.[5]

Wales had a distinct cultural identity, deeply rooted in its language, history, and traditions. The Welsh language held significant importance, especially in rural communities, where it was often the primary means of communication. Therefore, any educational reforms were scrutinized through the lens of language preservation and cultural heritage.

One aspect of the 1902 Education Act that garnered support in Wales was its recognition of the Welsh language. The Act allowed for the teaching of Welsh in schools, which was seen as a positive step towards preserving the language and fostering national identity. Welsh-speaking communities

welcomed this provision as a means of safeguarding their cultural heritage in the face of increasing Anglicization efforts.

Opposition to the Act much like the previous one from 1870 stemmed from concerns about the influence of the Anglican Church in Welsh education. Wales had a strong Nonconformist tradition, with many dissenting Protestant denominations. Nonconformists feared that the Act would prioritize Anglican religious instruction, marginalizing their own faiths. This resistance was particularly pronounced in areas where Nonconformity held sway, leading to tensions over religious control of schools.

Another source of contention was the Act's introduction of local education authorities, which centralized control over education. While some welcomed the prospect of standardized education provision, others opposed it on grounds of local autonomy. In Wales, with its strong sense of community and regional identity, there was apprehension about relinquishing control over education to distant authorities in London.

The 1902 Education Act also intersected with socio-economic factors in Wales. The country grappled with poverty, especially in industrialized areas, where access to education was limited for working-class children. While the Act aimed to improve educational opportunities for all, concerns lingered about the perpetuation of class divides. Working-class communities sought assurances that the Act would genuinely address their needs and provide equitable access to education. The Act galvanized political mobilization in Wales, particularly among emerging nationalist and socialist movements. Organizations like the Welsh Nationalist Party and the Labour Party capitalized on discontent with the Act to rally support for broader political agendas. For these groups, opposition to the Act was part of a

larger struggle for self-determination, social justice, and linguistic rights.[6]

The 1944 Education Act, known as the Butler Act, brought about significant changes to the educational landscape in Wales, eliciting both positive and negative reactions from the Welsh population. One aspect of the Act that was generally well-received in Wales was its commitment to providing universal access to education. The Act aimed to ensure that all children, regardless of their background or social status, had the opportunity to receive a comprehensive education up to the age of 15. This provision was particularly welcomed in Wales, where access to education had historically been limited in rural and industrialized areas, and where there was a strong desire to address educational inequalities.

Another aspect of the 1944 Education Act that garnered support in Wales was its recognition of the Welsh language and culture. The Act affirmed the importance of Welsh as a living language and recognized the need to promote and preserve it within the educational system. This was seen as a positive step towards safeguarding Welsh identity and heritage, especially in rural communities where the language was still widely spoken. The Act's provisions for Welsh-language instruction and the establishment of Welsh-medium schools were seen as vital for the continued vitality and survival of the language.

However, despite these positive aspects, there were also elements of the 1944 Education Act that drew criticism and opposition in Wales. One contentious issue was the Act's continued support for denominational schools, particularly those affiliated with the Church of England. In Wales, where Nonconformity was strong, there were concerns about the Act's potential to perpetuate the dominance of Anglican religious instruction in schools and undermine the autonomy of Nonconformist communities. This led to debates about the role of religion in education and calls for greater inclusivity

and respect for diverse faith traditions.

Furthermore, there were concerns about the Act's impact on the Welsh language and its promotion within the educational system. While the Act recognized the importance of Welsh, some critics argued that it did not go far enough in ensuring the availability of Welsh-language education or supporting the development of Welsh-medium schools. There were fears that English-language instruction would overshadow efforts to promote Welsh and that the Act's provisions could potentially weaken the status of the language in Wales.[7]

With the introduction of compulsory free education in the late nineteenth century, the Board of Education (later Ministry of Education) became responsible for the training and approval of qualified teachers: initially in state elementary schools and subsequently at the secondary level with the increase in the school leaving age (to 14 in 1918, and 15 in 1947). In the years before the First World War a system of 'blacklisting' had been created, whereby teachers who were 'guilty of sexual misconduct' were required to hand back their teaching certificate and were prohibited from further employment. In 1909 the Board of Education referred to the preservation of a 'strict standard of morality among teachers' and of the need to 'think much more of the welfare of the children than of the teacher'.

Local Education Authorities which were the employers of the teachers were required to report serious allegations to the Education Board. A teacher would be suspended until he had 'cleared his character' or was struck off altogether if a prima facie case was established upon internal inquiry by the Board. [8] Unfortunately with this growth of the school system much like other large institutions of the time there was a lack of protections in place to protect children. This well maybe not as detrimental to the image of the school system as a whole by the Welsh population certainly would have caused a deeply

negative harm to the individuals and their families that were harmed by malicious educators. Due to Victorian ideas of masculinity and femininity, it would have been unlikely that these gravely wronged pupils would have seen any justice.

Despite the many setbacks and opposition increase in school attendance rates in Wales between the 1870 Education Act and the 1944 Education Act was significant, reflecting the impact of both legislative changes and broader societal shifts. In the period following the 1870 Education Act, which aimed to establish compulsory elementary education, there was a notable expansion in access to schooling across Wales. Before this Act, educational provision was often limited, particularly in rural areas and among the working classes. The Act mandated the creation of locally-elected school boards and provided funding for the construction of new schools, leading to increased enrollment rates.

However, despite these improvements, attendance rates varied across different regions and communities, and challenges such as poverty and child labour continued to impact school participation. The 1944 Education Act built upon the foundation laid by its predecessor, further expanding educational opportunities and reinforcing the principle of compulsory education up to the age of 15. This Act aimed to create a more comprehensive and equitable educational system, with provisions for free secondary education and measures to address social and economic barriers to attendance.

As a result of these legislative efforts and broader societal changes, school attendance rates in Wales experienced a substantial increase between the 1870s and the mid-20th century. While precise data may vary, especially considering factors such as population growth and regional disparities, overall trends indicate a significant improvement in access to schooling and higher rates of enrollment and attendance

across Wales during this period.

In conclusion, the Education Acts spanning 1870 to 1944 played a significant role in shaping Welsh education and influencing attendance rates. While these legislative measures aimed to address educational disparities and promote cultural identity, their impact was multifaceted and contingent upon various socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. Despite successes in expanding access to education and recognizing the importance of Welsh language and culture, challenges such as regional disparities, religious tensions, and implementation issues persisted. Moving forward, it is crucial to acknowledge the complexities of these Acts and their implications for broader societal transformations. By critically examining their successes and limitations, we can better understand the evolving nature of Welsh education and work towards fostering a more equitable, safe and inclusive educational system for future generations.

Word Count 2777

Endnotes

[1]Donald Read, *The Age of Urban Democracy* (Routledge, 2014), 94.

[2]Rowland Hamilton, “Popular Education in England and Wales before and after the Elementary Education Act of 1870,” *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 46, no. 2 (June 1883): 283, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2979241>.

[3]Deirdre Raftery, Jane McDermid, and Gareth Elwyn Jones, “Social Change and Education in Ireland, Scotland and Wales: Historiography on Nineteenth-Century Schooling,” *History of Education* 36, no. 4-5 (July 2007): 447–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00467600701496690>.

[4]Eaglesham, Eric. “Implementing the Education Act of 1902.” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 1, 1962): 168. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3118775>.

[5]Deborah James, “‘Teaching Girls’: Intermediate Schools and Career Opportunities for Girls in the East Glamorgan Valleys of Wales, 1896-1914,” *History of Education* 30, no. 6 (November 2001): 514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00467600110072114>.

[6]N. R. Gullifer, "Opposition to the 1902 Education Act," *Oxford Review of Education* 8, no. 1 (1982): 83–98, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1050168>.

[7]S.J.D. GREEN, "The 1944 Education Act: A Church-State Perspective," *Parliamentary History* 19, no. 1 (February 2000): 148–64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-0206.2000.tb00450.x>.

[8]Adrian Bingham et al., "Historical Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales: The Role of Historians," *History of Education* 45, no. 4 (May 9, 2016): 411–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760x.2016.1177122>.

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