



FEATURE

Thirty years syne

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DOI Number: <https://doi.org/10.26203/mfnp-pb29>

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To cite this feature: McKichan, F., (2006). Thirty years syne. *Education in the North*, **14**, pp.51-52.



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Thirty years syne

Finlay McKichan looks back on three decades as college lecturer and the changes he has seen

I joined the staff of Aberdeen College of Education in 1970 (a year after the official opening of the Hilton Campus) and left the staff of its successor, Aberdeen University's School of Education, in 2005. It might be of interest to old-stagers and recent recruits to the School of Education to have some reminiscences to illustrate how life has changed for teacher educators over that period. A good place to start may be my original contract. Lecturers were expected to 'continue the study of their subjects and, where possible, to contribute to the literature of their subjects'. There was no Research Assessment Exercise in these days to enforce the expectation. On the other hand, leave provision made it easier to do so: 'Lecturers shall have, in addition to the Christmas and Easter vacations (each about three weeks) an annual holiday entitlement of not less than two continuous months'. This enabled me to complete a higher degree much faster than had I still been a school teacher.

I was appointed at the end of the period of rapid expansion of teacher training in the 1960s. It was a time of great optimism in education, when funds appeared to be readily available for new projects. That 'Golden Age' was brought to an end by the crises of the 1970s. I joined a History Department which numbered seven lecturers. One reason for this was a large intake of graduates training as secondary teachers. I see from the College 'Class Register' which I have for 1971-2 that I was responsible for teaching and visiting a group of 15 Honours History graduates. There were, I think, two other groups, producing an annual output of approaching 50 History teachers.

One of the pleasures of the job was being paid for driving round what for me was a new part of Scotland. However, then as now, the pleasure is somewhat diminished in treacherous winter weather. In December 1973 lecturers' mileage was estimated by the College in order to apply for a business ration of petrol in the fuel crisis which followed the 1973 Arab/Israeli War (one of the first indications of changing times). I still have my form which indicates, I think, a rather conservative monthly average of 275 miles. Some current tutors might regard this as a low figure. On one memorable occasion my new car was run into by the vehicle driven by the student whose lesson I had just seen. I could excuse his first concern being whether his grade would be affected. Fortunately his

performance was good enough for there to be no doubt on that point. The lesson reports from that period were very short documents compared to the modern equivalent. At that time it was not considered necessary to give detailed written feedback to students nor to justify the grade by reference to a detailed national standard: in this respect we have undoubtedly progressed.

The other major reason for the expansion of teacher education in the 1960s was the introduction of BEd degree courses for potential secondary and primary teachers. Dr David Northcroft has chronicled in the 1998 issue of this journal how the energy and foresight of Principal James Scotland contributed to Aberdeen introducing the first such degree in Scotland. The degree was granted (and the quality monitored) by Aberdeen University and the programme included academic subject courses which paralleled those offered by the University but were taught by College staff and not by the University's subject specialists. I was appointed not only to work with History graduates but also to teach a first-year BEd course on modern Scottish History. For a person with my interests this was particularly attractive work. I note from a class register of that period that one of my former Scottish History students (and a high performing one) is now a deputy minister in the Scottish Executive. Another Primary History course which I took was with an all male group, known among lecturers as 'The Roaring Boys'. (One of them is now a senior and respected head teacher.) It seems surprising that it was considered appropriate to have single-sex groups. There were 15 men in that group, reflecting the greater success then in attracting men to primary teaching.

Having taught for a short time in the MacRobert building, I know how comprehensively the classrooms have been fitted with the latest technology, such as data projectors and interactive whiteboards. However, the Hilton Campus was very much at the cutting edge of technology when it was built in the '60s: there was a television feed into every classroom (though without the flexibility of the later VHS machines), and so I was able to use television programmes in my teaching, which was not possible in secondary schools then. Programmes were either taken live or recorded by the technicians of the College TV Service. Replay of pre-recorded programmes had to be booked, which made it

necessary to use a programme at a specified time and impossible to fast forward between clips. Many programmes were made by the TV Service for internal and external use (in black and white, of course). One of my first College memories is of taking part in a taster course on television production. Much use was also made in the 1970s of the then new technology of audio-tape cassettes. More traditional technology like the filmstrip was still employed: when the Hilton storerooms were being cleared out in 2005, a long-disused filmstrip projector was found a new home as a museum object in the Aberdeen Environmental Education Centre.

The period of expansion around 1970 was so rapid that the Hilton Campus was too small as soon as it was opened and was not able to accommodate all classes until J, K and L blocks were completed in 1972. For a year or so my classes continued on the top floor of the 1920s College building in St. Andrew Street (the 'TC'). While lower floors had already been taken over and modernised by Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology, our floor had changed little since the 1920s and the atmosphere seemed impregnated with the chalk dust of ages. The passing traffic (even in the early '70s) made it the noisiest place in which I have ever taught.

One external symbol of an affluent institution when I first joined was the annual Governors' Reception. This was a very grand affair. In the theatre the Principal and Chairman of Governors welcomed the guests, who included College staff and head teachers of schools in our province. In the refectory a fine meal was followed by ballroom dancing to a live orchestra. Dress was formal, which meant for this ill-equipped young lecturer hiring a dinner suit. Invitation cards advised 'Carriages at midnight'.

The opening of J, K and L blocks marked the high water mark of expansion, and the Arab/Israeli War of 1973 and the consequent oil price hike foreshadowed harsher times. Government spending was cut back and quotas for entry to teacher training sharply reduced. As a consequence, it was no longer considered necessary to train secondary teachers in Aberdeen by the BEd route. This called in question the future of the original BEd degree, which it must be admitted had done more to give primary teachers a good general education than to prepare them for the classroom. By the 1980s a more directly relevant BEd Primary programme was introduced. The combined effect of these developments was to curtail considerably the workload of a significant number of College subject specialists on permanent contracts. One solution to this redundancy was the school-based in-service programme, in which

schools were encouraged to seek the support (provided free) of a College tutor, who would work with a teacher or teachers and their classes to develop some aspect of the curriculum. Many of the requests were from primary schools wishing to work with subject (former secondary) staff, and this often led to a fruitful partnership, with tutors contributing subject expertise and materials and learning in return much about the role their subject could play in the primary school. In Grampian Region the typical format was for the tutor to visit a school for a morning or afternoon weekly, while in the Highlands and Islands the more common arrangement was to spend a week in the school. I worked in city and country schools and particularly enjoyed helping to develop and implement fieldwork activities. Classes were taken round urban trails, to stone circles, chambered cairns, brochs, the Skara Brae Stone Age village, Highland clearances sites, water mills, and old bridges and roadways. I believe that work outside the classroom in this and other aspects of Environmental Studies has added greatly to the educational experience of pupils: it would be regrettable if it were curtailed because of funding problems or the bureaucracy required now to take children out of school.

For a townie like myself it is perhaps natural that the activities in relatively remote schools should have left the most vivid memories. Some are the brief flashbacks we all have of memorable situations: the cuckoo calling loudly and close to my bedroom in Sutherland, or the warm light of a tillylamp for my preparation work while I lodged in a Wester Ross fisherman's unelectrified house (and the loan of a lamp to walk back from the house further down the loch side of a teacher who had kindly invited me to dinner). A more down-to-earth memory is of trying to take photographs from an Islander aircraft as it landed on an Orkney island on an airstrip which was also a cattle field. For reasons that may be guessed, the window gradually turned brown and photography was impossible. A week in a very small school in Ross-shire left me full of admiration for the professional skills and enterprise of the teacher, who subsequently raised enough money to take the entire school on two visits to Canada.

Today's business-like approach to higher education would not permit a tutor to tour around Highland and Island schools when he ought to be working towards the Research Assessment Exercise. However, I believe that school-based in-service made a significant contribution, not only to the schools concerned but also to the subsequent involvement of the tutors in pre-service and in-service courses and curriculum development.