



• DORNOCH •
HERITAGE • SOCIETY

Education, Education, Education

talk by

John Muir

14th March 2006

When I was asked to speak about education, I thought, well, there's lots of boring things happening in education and you're hearing lots of things on the television and I could talk about the history of education in Sutherland, about which I'd love to do some research. I heard there's some interesting new history reading about education in Dornoch.

But I don't know what was education like to you? If I were to take a random sample, Hugh, what are your memories of school? Was it an enjoyable experience for you?

"As far as I was concerned, yes". Yeah, that's good.

What incident do you most remember?

"Well, the first thing that interested me was the very long travelling. To get to school it was about almost three miles away. So I had to stay with relatives near the school. That was for primary. Junior, secondary. They gave me a bike to travel into Sweden at that time, which again was five miles each way. But it was all enjoyable".

Good. So, anybody who looks back in school was glad to get out of it? Nobody? We're all very, very keen people here.

"I went from an ordinary school to a boarding school, and that was a shock the first day".

I'm sure it was. How about you Peter, was it a pleasurable experience in your school?

"Yes, yes".

That's all very interesting. But we often take teachers for granted, I think, and I thought I would just talk about some of my experiences in education, which is history, I suppose.

What is history? One mother said that I don't want my son to study history because there's no future in it. And when you mention history you think of ancient times, but as I look back I realise a lot of the things that have changed in education, I'm looking back on history. Because next year, 2007, you probably heard in the news that there's going to be lots of changes in education. 2007's going to be a big year. There's going to be a new curriculum coming out, and lots of changes in the Highlands. Some teachers here are wondering what's going to happen. There is going to be lots of change called the 'Curriculum for Excellence'.

One of the things I have noticed about education is that it tends to change from one year to the next, literally from one year to the next. There was a time when maybe things seemed to stand still. It was the end of the month, and the school secretary had just walked into the classroom and handed the teacher a brown envelope. The teacher smiled as he put it in his pocket. *"Is that a letter for you, sir?"* said one cheeky little fellow, standing at the desk waiting for his book to be marked. *"It's really none of your business, Tommy, the teacher said, but if you must know, it's my well-earned pay"*. And the wee fellow said *"Pay, sir? Where do you work?"*

There is a view that when you're at school the teacher is somebody who is just there. When my wife and I were discussing that very thing about the pay that she received as a nursery teacher, my elder daughter when she was about six or seven said, *"Do you get paid to play in the nursery?"* And that's often actually children's view of it. The fact is that teaching is thought by many, young and old, to be a very cushy profession. There's good pay, pretty good pay, long holidays and a seemingly short working day. As far as parents are concerned, they value teachers above all as childminders. Watch this, when it snows, of course, they're all concerned. One of the aphorisms that I once saw in a magazine sums it up: that parents don't appreciate teachers until it rains all day on a Saturday. That's very true.

So how do teachers survive then? How have they survived over the years? I think it is true that there is a growing shortage of teachers for a variety of reasons, not least because of the pressures. Some do and some don't survive it. But I certainly, and many of my colleagues, rely on a quick wit and a sense of humour. I certainly couldn't have survived even my first probationary year, let alone the last 35 years that I've been in education, if I didn't have a sense of humour.

I wonder, as I've said, what education is to you. I recall my own primary days as quite happy. I don't remember an awful lot about it. I do remember on the second day my mother told me that I was put to the back of the line because I didn't have a partner. So I just went home. And my mother dragged me with her hand and said that she would go to prison if I didn't go to school. Nowadays it seems that parents take children out of school very, very easily. Certainly secondary school.

I recall mixed views of secondary school. It was an experience to me where I had some very good teachers and had some teachers who gave me the belt, I yet don't know why they gave me the belt. I didn't know what I was doing or what I wasn't

doing but I was given the belt. Maybe many of you experienced that as well. Is that your experience here at school? “Yes. Sometimes. With one particular teacher”..

‘Do we need education?’ was a slogan during one of the many pay disputes over the last 35 years. Somebody had that up at the back of their car. Over the last 35 years I’ve thought do we need education? Does anybody like to tell me why that might not be the case? For those you who are not scientists H_2O which is water and H_2SO_4 which is hydro sulfuric acid look the same in a jar. (For ages I was unable to get my computer to print the lower-case numbers!) But if you know about science you will know that Hydrogensulfide or Sulfane is a colourless compound that has a rotten egg-like smell, it is flammable, corrosive, and toxic.

We often think we don't need education and then it comes to the crunch. It's interesting reading the book on the history of education how many went through the system when it was only boys who were schooled. Later they brought in girls but it was not a compulsory thing, it was something you did if you felt you wanted to, until there was a real demand for literacy.

It is now almost 35 years since I started in education. I remember my first day I arrived at the school in Livingston Newtown when my wife and I started to teach. We were very keen and eager. As I went into the school there was a big sign ‘All visitors must report to the headteacher’ followed by arrows. I knocked and I was about to enter when I saw what looked like traffic lights in the door. The school had Zones and they had this set of traffic lights. As it was red I was thinking about trying to relate this to the highway code. After I knocked would they turned to green? Now interestingly the headteacher was a Mr Green and as I went into his office this cheery gentleman was holding out his hand and shook mine firmly, ushered me to a chair and said, ‘When do you want to enrol your child’. I sputtered something about being the new teacher, blushed a little, he laughed and apologised and said we need all the people we can get now. That was the days Livingston Newtown and other schools were bursting at the seams and they were short of teachers. We were offered any school we wanted in this new town. After a few words the headmaster said here's your class list as a means of introduction to the class. One name caught my eye ‘Anthony Clifford Jones’ and I thought anyone with a name like that has got to be of good stock. Later when I stood in front of the class I could see no child who's dress and demeanour fitted that name. Reading out the roll of about 40 names, that was the class size in fact there was no limit to class sizes. It's not really history; this was really 1972. As I was going through all these names, working out in my mind how I would cope with the three Tracys, the two Fionas, a Lesley and a Leslie, Anthony Clifford Jones stood up when I shouted his name. He had ruffled spiky hair, a runny nose and worn-out trousers which had seen better days. He was the model I thought for *Oor Willie*; a bit more about him later. The reality of that class was that within a short time this wonderful group of kids began to show their true colours. When a new teacher has got themselves established and stamped their authority on a class, cruel children cease to take it out on a teacher.

I watched Anthony one day just before playtime. (I've changed his name, just in case somebody here has a relative of that name.) He was furtively passing things to several of his mates. I ignored it but when he did the same thing the next day at the same time I thought I had to investigate what he was doing. I said, “what have you

got show me what you're doing there" and he revealed a large brown bag with shortbread in it. He explained that his mother worked in Paterson's oat cake and shortbread factory down the road and I discovered that she actually purloined them at the factory. I said *"how does this happen, how does your mother get them"* he said *"It's easy, she smuggles them out in her knickers. Do you want one sir"*. There was much laughter in the class.

As the days and weeks rolled on I was getting more and more cheesed off with the behaviour of this class. It was quite a tough class and I wondered if teaching was indeed my calling. Just when I was at the stage of wishing I had been trained at Tully Island Police College instead of Hamilton College, one incident broke the ice and led me to understand what was said about humour. It was a warm September day. Almost every teacher has experienced that it is the time of year when it's a bit too cold to be summer and a bit too warm to be going towards autumn. So you open all the windows especially when you're in large classes. I was beginning to get the class in my hands. I was talking under perfect control using all the strategies that I was told to do when a wasp flew in I realised this wasp was going to be an absolute pest. So I walked over to my desk went to my briefcase and pulled out my Scotsman. I rolled up the newspaper and killed it dead on the window. I turned back to go back to the blackboard and a muffled voice from the back of the class said, *"I think the man deserves a clap"* and immediately the whole class began to cheer. Until that time I had always had a stony face with this class because I was told by the head teacher, in old fashioned terms totally against my education philosophy and all that I had been taught, that 'you hate them and they hate you'. That was a terrible thing to say about a class but he said you must keep them under control because there's a few rascals in there.

The interesting thing is I smiled and I laughed and I had to stop what I was doing. And suddenly I think they saw me as a human being not just a teacher. While I identify that wasp incident as the inspiration for my first book of classroom clangers, which came out in 1984, many other humorous things inspired me to put pen to paper.

But how important is spelling? When you were at school it was important. I would say HMI head teachers are obsessed with spelling. If somebody writes to you and there's a lot of spelling mistakes it tells you long before dyslexia is mentioned that there's something wrong. People rarely say I can't read and I can't write very well but they'll say quite boldly I can't count. There's something about literacy which seems to be more important than numeracy and especially spelling. I think there's an obsession and we fail to understand in education the complexities of the English language and how we learn to read.

There is more to learning to read than just the accurate spelling because we don't have a phonetic language. As we become adults that's why when we read and write we often miss out words or we miss reading words. The way the human mind works it doesn't matter what order the letters in a word are, the important thing is that the first and the last letter are in the right place. So this shows something about our obsession with spelling. This is not suggesting that this is the way we should teach children to write but it's interesting.

Of course nowadays we have introduced to schools the spell checker and the spell checker is a wonderful thing. Anybody here got a computer? Who hasn't got a computer? Oh gosh, right, everybody has got one. When I get documents I put them through the spell checker, but there are great dangers in the spell checker.

As this little poem shows when you put this through a spell checker it's exactly 100% correct. The spell checker doesn't alter a single word spelt wrongly. This can be the same with dictionaries. If you give a child a dictionary they'll come up with the strangest of things and this can be particularly the case if you search in a foreign language. I remember my own daughter when she was learning French, to translate from English into French she looked up a dictionary and she put then wrote "*il est à la duvet les escaliers*". She had looked up the word for "down" and it came up as "duvet". So we get obsessions in education about the use of dictionaries.

But many of mistakes are often grammatical. This is particularly the case with the use of the apostrophe although there are ways of remembering when to use it. The one I like and you may well have seen is the '*Greengrocer's Apostrophe*' used even when taught the pitfalls. Every teacher knows that when they do a lesson in use of the apostrophe for the next several weeks you get 'tadpoles' all over the page. It is not that the teacher hasn't taught it, it is that they don't know how to use it. I've never found an easy way of teaching this. We always say to children that they must read their work over very carefully but this is difficult in infant classes. A headteacher was taking a group of new infants around the school stressing that whenever an adult told them to do anything they've got to obey instantly. Walking along the corridor with them he saw a boy running when only walking is allowed in schools. That is the golden rule and when the headteacher turned around all the little ones were kneeling at his feet! It would be nice to think that all our commands were obeyed so instantly.

I think it is true that we have major behaviour issues and attitudes in the nursery that never occurred in my day. It is getting increasingly the case to blame the parents and we all like to think that certainly it is not our children. I used to say that I would never criticise other people's teenagers until mine were off my hands. I think every teacher who started 35 years ago like myself or even further back would say "*Oh no the children are not what they used to be*" but I think it's maybe different, not necessarily better or worse depends on your viewpoint. Even Ministers sons have been known to cause problems in schools. One of my staff wrote to a Minister about the appalling behaviour of his offspring in the class and, to put a touch of humour into the communication, she referred to curbing his original sin. In his reply the Minister took the point, promised to do his best to support the teacher and added "you may be right about the sins on his mother's side". So we all like to think that it is not our fault! With anybody who has children, it is one of the most annoying things to see your own personality coming out in the children. Whenever you're dealing with children you really need the parents on your side but it's not always easy. Take my encounter with the aforementioned Anthony Clifford Jones mother. I had been warned that she was a bit of a man eater and she was currently unattached. Mr Green, the headteacher said just watch her very, very carefully. The lady arrived at my first parent's evening, in December I think it was, dressed in a red poncho which was fashionable in the 1970s but she had hers trimmed with white fur and she looked like Mother Christmas. I found it hard to get that image out of my mind as I tried to talk about her son's work

or the lack of it and to crown it all she was wearing false eyelashes. So it became obvious to me that this woman all dolled up, wearing false eyelashes looking like Mother Christmas, flitting her eyelids as she talked, was trying to charm me. I don't know what she was trying to do. I was young then, maybe attractive. As she spoke one of her eyelashes was slowly detaching from her eye and just as she said I'm glad that Anthony has got a fine young man like you as a role model, the black object dropped from her eyelid down the front of her dress. I didn't get around to informing her of her son's behaviour as I couldn't get a word in the edge ways before I had to move on to the next customer. She was certainly not what I thought would be the mother of Anthony Clifford Jones!

I was glad that parent turned out on cold nights but it's not easy for some to go back to their old school with their kids, especially dads. Many parents and teachers say they can't get dads to go out and it's often the mother that comes on her own. It can be that is often the case because they're single parents. But dads for some reason often don't go to parents evenings in some areas. I was anxious to meet one dad and I pressed the boy to do all he could to get him to come to the next parents night. To my surprise the man came and I asked the boy next day how he had managed to persuade his father and he said, *"I told him that my new teacher was a gorgeous young blonde so father came out that night"*.

There are lots of funny things that happen in schools and some of you may have read this book illustrated by George Glass who used to be the head teacher in Dornoch Primary. I'll give you some of the things that children have written in their books. I frequently had to correct my cook's spelling. I wrote down quite a few of them she liked to put the menu up on the board in the canteen. This is one which I was quite common one, diary instead of dairy. I left George to decide to choose the ones that he felt he could illustrate best. People often say no pupil should leave school until he has mastered the basics of the arts (laughter). And we would often hear this from secondary teachers, parents and from people outside education, that nobody should leave primary school without talking about history (laughter). One young man told his parents that he wanted to drop history because there was no future in it (laughter). Many people said they wanted their children to do this and it's from the great expectations (laughter). My wife is also a teacher and being married to a teacher can be an advantage and a disadvantage, not only because there's danger that you talk shop all day or all night. We both taught difficult classes in our first year and I think every teacher remembers the first class. I don't want to embarrass my wife with this one but like me she was very tense during these first few weeks and she had to keep her class in hand all the time. In the first few weeks of teaching we had gone to bed and she had immediately fallen asleep. I was reading a book before I put out the light. Not long after I was up to go to the toilet and had just put my hand on the door handle door when she sat up and said, *"Have you got permission to leave the room"*. (laughter).

Teachers see silly things too. I remember when I was an assistant head one of my dreadful tasks was to take my turn supervising some 600 children in the dining room. Anybody who has been a teacher has done dinner duty. I was trying to eat my lunch at the same time as trying to get up and down. The noise was building up so I stopped, banged the table got everybody quiet and I turned round to them and said now eat your lunch and do not open your mouth. Of course there was laughter and that was it

I had lost it completely. They were putting their forks all over the place. As I have said I rose through the ranks over the 35 years, from class teacher to assistant head of a rural school in the Highlands, before joining what was once called the Advisory Service before changing to the Quality Improvement Service. We have gone from Support to Quality Assurance and I'm not going about the woes of all that. I think we borrowed a lot of this jargon from industry. We talk about audits, we talk about quality assurance and development plans, and schools now spend an awful lot of time doing that. One of the reasons I think we can't get head teachers is because they are too bogged down in all the things instead of getting on to the actual teaching.

If you talk to anybody who has been a head teacher for quite a long while it's beginning to look like teaching is like a walled city, the people on the outside want to get in and the people on the inside want to get out. I've got reservations about many of the changes as I approach retirement. But I've also got many happy memories. I have had the privilege of going to several countries and for several years I was a visiting lecturer in Finland. When I was there I was speaking to a group of inspectors during a comparative study of the education system in Finland and Scotland and the inspectors said to me: *'Having looked at the Finnish education system do you think our education system is better or worse than in Scotland'*. I replied saying, as an illustration for many comparisons, there was a Finnish schools inspector who decided he would go to Scotland for his holidays and his friend said do you know that they drive on the other side of the road. He said, *'hmm I've forgotten that'* so a week later he said, *'there's no way I'm going to Scotland for my holidays because I tried driving in it in Helsinki and it was an absolute nightmare'*. So I said: "sometimes things are not necessarily better or worse but they're different and anybody who's done any travelling abroad you can taste something or look at something and it will be different. I discovered in Finland all the doors open out instead of in and you discover in Scandinavia you put the lights up to go on and down to go off. Whenever things are different they're not necessarily better or worse.

I get very concerned when education ministers look to the past and look to the future and say that things are better in another country and they take a text out of context and use it as a pretext for change Schools. I have reservations about changes. I find and I'm sure you do that there must be care yearning for things from the past. I've got some good memories of visiting schools on a regular basis. In one school I was wearing a suit and a wee boy said: *'Oh there's a policeman coming into the classroom'*. I think he thought I was dressed like a detective!

I've had to visit some interesting schools in remote areas including Saarland in south west Germany and Altena Breck in Caithness which I thought was one of the most godforsaken places on earth. It was like a moonscape and I was advised not to take my car, because you must go way up through the hills over very difficult unmade up roads. Although Altena Breck was the most remote school in Scotland, if not in the United Kingdom, you could get a train to it from Brora. I was able to visit the school in the morning and travel back to Brora just after lunch. Now the interesting thing is that all schools in remote areas get a 'remoteness allowance' but Altena Breck didn't because it was near a railway station. I recall the first time I visited I was told that it was a request stop. I was told to tell the guard at the station before that I wanted to get off at Altena Breck so that he could remind the driver to stop the train. Sometimes it was an old type of train with a guard van next to the engine because so there could

be communication with the driver. You were also advised to tell the guard that you're coming back in the next train. After several visits I went on a very foggy day when I could hardly see my hand in front of me. I could hear the train thundering down the line and it shot past the station and I could just see the two red lights disappearing into the mist. I was standing there in this mist with a suit and a briefcase and I said what am I going to do. The next train left at six o'clock at night and I thought what am I going to do here for all this time when suddenly there was this horrendous screech and the train came back for me! I was pulled into the rear of the train by the guard who came along and he said gosh we didn't know you were coming. There can't be very many places in Britain where that can happen, coming back for a passenger if they go past anybody on the station. There is a great relationship with the railway which serves the local remote communities whenever there may be breakdowns or extreme weather.

Another remote place I visited was Loch Cor which is way up towards Kinbrace. The first time I was told I had to go to visit, it was one of the last side schools in Scotland. There was no head teacher, there was a teacher and one pupil in the school. I had to go way up a track. It wasn't a very nice. After 12 miles I turned left and what I didn't do was look at the miles at the beginning of my journey. I couldn't go any faster than a few miles an hour and three quarters of an hour later I was still on a track getting worse. Suddenly there was this oasis that they call Loch Cor. People are still amazed that in the Highlands we will maintain a school for one pupil. In Altnaharra we have two or three pupils now and when a Canadian visitor was with us he said you could send them off to a boarding school. It was true we could afford to send them to Eton for the cost of educating them there. He said why do you do that, to preserve the accent? It is one of the problems in the Highlands, the actual cost of educating people.

Then there is Ardmore. Some of you may have read the books of John Ridgway who lives in Ardmore Point. It is a long involved story but John wrote a book called 'Road to Elizabeth' about Elizabeth who he literally plucked from the jungle and brought her back to Ardmore. She had learnt some English and one of the things that I had to do was to go and visit her because they wanted to educate her at home in Ardmore. You may have seen in the Northern Times that the postman won't go there but he told me to stick to a path even if there was water. Of course I had a suit and a briefcase and I was going along this track when I should have been dressed in plus fours and it came to a waterfall. The path went up through the waterfall and into the woods with branches everywhere. I arrived there like a man from the ministry to see the girl.

Some other experiences I've had was when I went up to Thurso for what I thought would be for a morning. It snowed and I couldn't get out of Thurso for two days! I was stuck with one of my colleagues who was already there and we couldn't move because the Ord was closed. We were in a hotel but we weren't ready to stay overnight for two nights! Another time one of my colleagues had to go over the Struie and got stuck for a night, couldn't get to Dingwall and there were no mobile phones in those days.

When you go into a school there can be some memorable experiences. I go in to look at what children are doing and in one school I went into many, many years ago, they had done a marvellous wall project about the different lorries from various European countries that pass through to the fishing port. I went over to a boy and I

said can you tell me a bit about this poster and he replied, *“Don’t ask me”* he said, *“I held the felt-tips”!* So that was his educational experience! We do get teachers of dubious quality and I suppose I shouldn’t say too much but there are the occasional rogue teachers. I have seen some amazing incidents and heard some amazing stories. But on the whole I would say with 99.9% of all the teachers despite all the issues and all that’s bombarding them, teachers perform as is expected,

Education has got to solve everything from teaching children to read, to brushing their teeth and looking after the lice that’s in their hair. And how often do you read the paper schools should be doing sex education. I’ll just tell you a humorous story health education. They have been encouraging children not to eat lots of chocolates and sweets and one early years teacher said if you eat too many sweets and too much chocolate you’ll get fat, and one of the teachers happened to be pregnant. One little fella went up to her and said, *“I know what you’ve been doing, eating too many sweets can make you fat”*.

Teaching children how to brush their teeth and how to wash their hands and following a lesson on hand washing, to make it a little bit more exciting after they had washed their hands they had to put them under an ultraviolet light and of course many of the children were fascinated to see that their hands were not really clean at all.

I always remember the closing speech at my graduation. The Principal reminded us that we were likely to be teaching the next two generations. Two generations, the children and their children in turn. And there is probably a few people in this room who are doing that already, teaching the children of the children that they taught. I’ve always said that when they come and say to you *“you taught my granny”* it’s time to think of retiring! But he also said that we should remember that the ones being taught will have to pay your pension, thus he said teach them well enough so that they earn enough to do so! I’ve always thought about that! But as I think of retiring despite the ups and downs I think I’d probably do it all again because I have met some very interesting people, worked with some marvellous teachers and enjoyed teaching some marvellous children. Of course not all children will flourish in later life but it is nice to think that in some way you may have helped them in their future. It is a great responsibility to be a parent moulding them but also as a teacher you get to know children almost as well if not more in other ways than their parents. This can be the case especially in some of the small schools a lot of small schools in Highlands. I’d like to think I’ve made a difference to the next generation and as teachers we really have got to believe that. If we didn’t think that we could change the world in some way as teachers we wouldn’t be in the job.

I hope we can be optimistic about the future as far as education is concerned. I think every teacher likes to feel that education has made a difference and I just hope that future governments future local authorities will give teachers the opportunity to do that.

Thank you.