

'MORAL STATISTICS': A NOTE ON LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS IN 1822

Charles W. J. Withers

Charles W. J. Withers is a lecturer in geography at the College of St Paul and St Mary, Cheltenham and is the author of several articles upon the historical geography of Scotland and the Scottish Highlands.

Much of the work on the educational history of the Scottish Highlands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has tended to focus on the history of legislation concerning that region.¹ Only more recently have attempts been made to examine the extent to which literacy in the Highlands was actually promoted by the acts and policies of the several institutions involved in the education of the Highlander in this period,² or to assess geographical and social variations amongst the Highland population in the ability to read and write.³ As several authors have pointed out, such questions are of particular interest given the divergent history of the Highlands compared with the Lowlands of Scotland⁴ and, not least, for the fact that two languages were spoken in the Highlands — the native Gaelic and English.⁵ Complex differences existed in the geographical intensity of the two languages in the Highlands as well as in the ways Gaelic and English were used in particular social situations.⁶ Ability to read or to write in one language was no indication of similar ability in the other.⁷ What follows is an attempt to illustrate such differences and to illuminate the geographical and social variations in the ability to speak and to read Gaelic or English in the Scottish Highlands in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

The educational history of the Highlands of Scotland is very different from that of Lowland Scotland. Difficulties presented by the geography of the area and the dispersed population were compounded by the problem of two languages. From the early seventeenth century until the late 1700s, education and learning in the Highlands had been almost exclusively in English, but from the late eighteenth century and more generally from the early years of the nineteenth century, Gaelic reading had been taught in Highland schools as a necessary initial step in the adoption of English.⁸ These 'language problems' as Durkacz has termed them,⁹ mean that 'literacy' in the Highlands is a difficult topic to measure or assess with any accuracy. In many places, it meant only the ability to read, in others both reading and writing. More importantly, literacy was based upon such ability in one language rather than another, and varied in strength throughout the Highland population in relation to the prevalence of the language in question. In the more strongly Gaelic north and west Highlands, schools were few and literally far between: the scatter of islands and lochs and generally difficult terrain made attendance infrequent at the best of times and work on the land often kept scholars from the schools altogether. An 'Act for Settling of Schools' of 1696 had directed the foundation of a school in every parish in Scotland, but was successful only in the Lowlands, and even there considerable variations existed.¹⁰ Even in eastern Ross and Cromarty where English

was more widely spoken than in the west, and where the problems of educational provision were less acute, important differences existed in the ability to read or write in Gaelic and English.¹¹

Several agencies were involved in the education of the Highlander. The Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) was founded in 1709, and SSPCK schools played an important part in the education of the Highlander.¹² Further institutions — Gaelic Society Schools, Free Church Schools, General Assembly of the Church of Scotland Schools in addition to parochial schools and those of a number of benevolent organisations — were also active from the early 1800s until the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act initiated a state-controlled education system north of the border. Despite the presence of these several bodies and their undoubted efforts to educate and 'improve' the Highlander through anglicisation in one way or another, not until the third decade of the nineteenth century is it possible to examine quantitative differences in the ability to read in the Highlands and assess geographical and linguistic variations in that ability.

Several of the early annual reports of the Gaelic Schools Society, established in Edinburgh in 1812, contain statements on the state of literacy and education among the population of the Highlands:¹³ in the strongly Gaelic parish of Harris, for example, in 1811, 'less than 200' persons were reported as able to read English, in a population of 3569: no one could read Gaelic.¹⁴ Amongst twenty Highland parishes in the north-west examined in 1811, with a total population of 42,756, only about 8,433 persons could read English and only 807 expressed any ability to read Gaelic, chiefly the Scriptures. In a number of Highland parishes where English was more widely spoken — in the south of Argyll, along the south-east margins of the Grampian uplands and eastern coastal districts of Ross and Cromarty and Inverness-shire — literacy in both Gaelic and English seems to have been higher. In general, it appears that throughout the Highlands, by the early years of the nineteenth century, the ability to read was much more prevalent amongst those who spoke English by preference or through ignorance of Gaelic than amongst those who spoke Gaelic. Not until 1822 is it possible to verify this evidence and cast light upon the variations in ability to read by region, parish and language group.

The Inverness Society for the Education of the Poor in the Highlands had been established in that town in 1818. In 1822, the Society undertook an investigation into the state of education in the Highlands. Their findings were published as a seventy-three page report (together with an Appendix of forty-eight pages) under the title **MORAL STATISTICS OF THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS OF SCOTLAND, compiled from returns received by the INVERNESS SOCIETY for the EDUCATION OF THE POOR IN THE HIGHLANDS (to which is prefixed, A Report on the Past and Present State of Education in these Districts)**. Inquiries into the state of education in the Highlands had been initiated by the Inverness Society because, in their view, earlier inquiries 'were generally conducted in a manner so loose, that no very definite results could be gathered from them'. All accounts, down to the latest period, agreed generally that in the more remote districts an immense proportion remained uneducated; but none could show correctly, either what had been done, or what remained to do.¹⁵ Four questions in

particular were asked of every family throughout the counties of Argyll, Inverness, Nairn, Ross and Cromarty, Sutherland, Caithness (Orkney and Shetland — both non-Gaelic), and the Gaelic districts of Moray and Perthshire: a total of 171 parishes, with a population in 1821 of over 416,000. The inquiry sought to find answers to the questions below:

- i) The number of persons above eight years **unable to read**, separating those above **twenty** years from those under that age. (Emphasis in original.)
- ii) The distance of each family from the nearest school.
- iii) The proportion of families possessing copies of the Scriptures.
- iv) The relative prevalence of the English and Gaelic languages.

To ascertain this information a **Schedule** was prepared, which, together with a circular letter describing the importance of the project, was sent to each member of the clergy in the Highlands, urging them to divide their parish into districts for ease of administration and 'to procure the assistance of fit persons to undertake the labour of investigation'.¹⁶ The **Schedule** itself asked for eleven items of information:

- i) Names of places of Residence.
- ii) Names of heads of Families.
- iii) How many persons are in the family above the age of eight years, including children and servants?
- iv) How many children are in the family under the age of eight years?
- v) How many persons in the family above the age of eight years can read?
- vi) How many from the age of eight to twenty cannot read?
- vii) Is Gaelic or English the language the family understands best?
- viii) What distance is the family from the nearest school?
- ix) Can the family pay any fee to a teacher?
- x) How many copies of the Bible or New Testament are in the family?
- xi) Would the family give any money to get a Bible, and how much?

The information thus gathered provided the basis for the answers to the four questions above.

Of the 171 parishes circulated, only 89 returned information. Of the thirty-eight parishes in Argyllshire, only four sent returns; of the Gaelic parishes circulated in Perthshire, none returned information: but of the eighty-four parishes making up Ross and Cromarty, Inverness, Sutherland, Nairn and Moray, all but twelve completed the **Schedules**.¹⁷ It is difficult to account for the fact that nearly 50 per cent of all parishes surveyed failed to respond: problems in visiting every family given the widely-scattered distribution of population must certainly have been a major hindrance. In any case, the Inverness Society reckoned that those returns they did receive were 'filled up with the utmost care and accuracy, and there can be no question of their meriting the greatest confidence'.¹⁸

In broad outline, the report reveals the general paucity of educational provisions in the Highlands.¹⁹ In its detailed findings, it provides an important picture of the variation over space and in language in educational levels. Of particular interest in relation to language and literacy are the replies of the eighty-nine parishes on the

extent to which Gaelic or English was preferred best and upon the ability to read either Gaelic or English. Information relating to these two questions has been presented in the form of maps (figs 1 to 4).

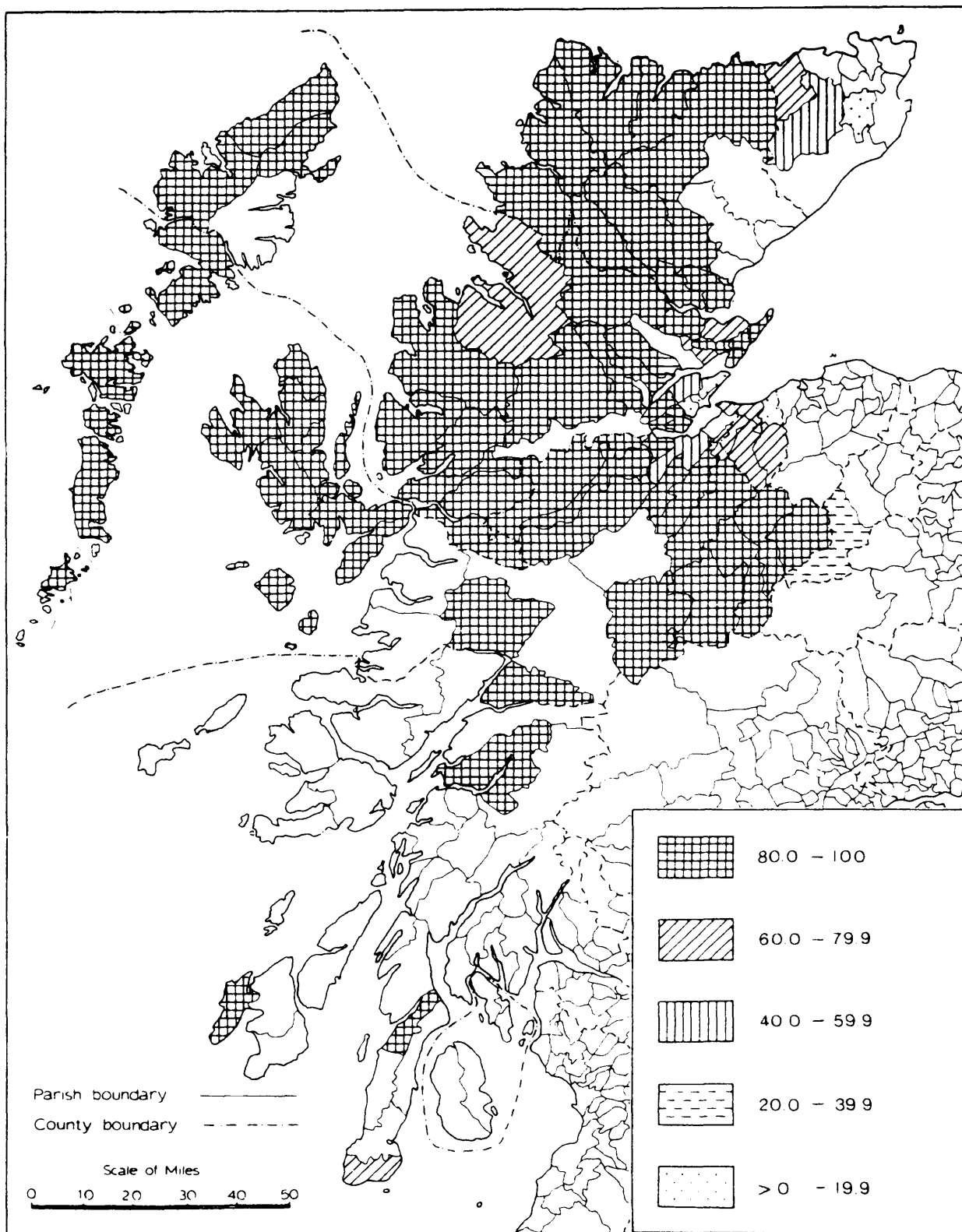


Figure 1 : Persons understanding and speaking Gaelic best as a percentage of the parish population, 1822. (Blank parishes are those for which there is no information.)

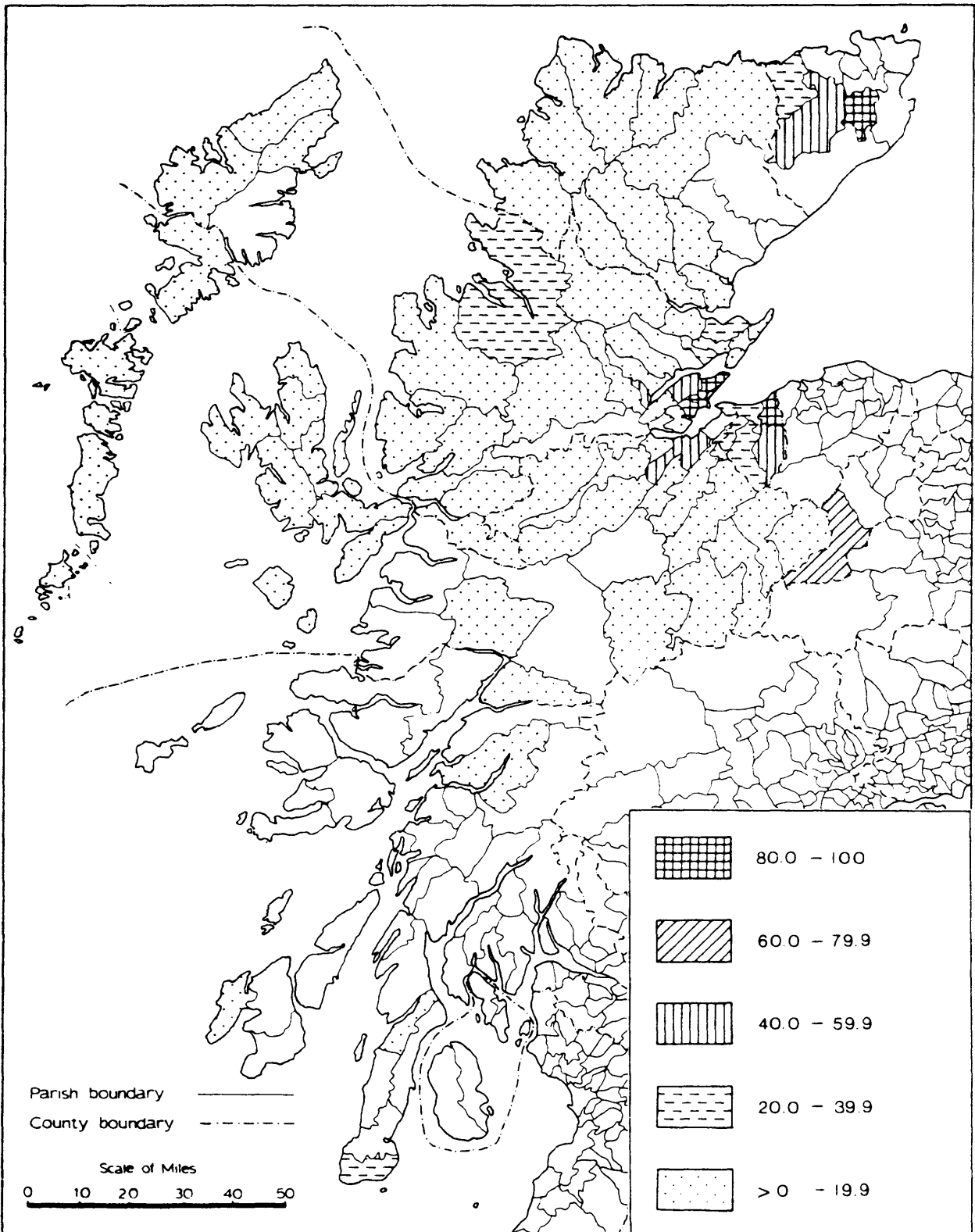


Figure 2 : Persons understanding and speaking English best as a percentage of the parish population, 1822, (Blank parishes are those for which there is no information.)

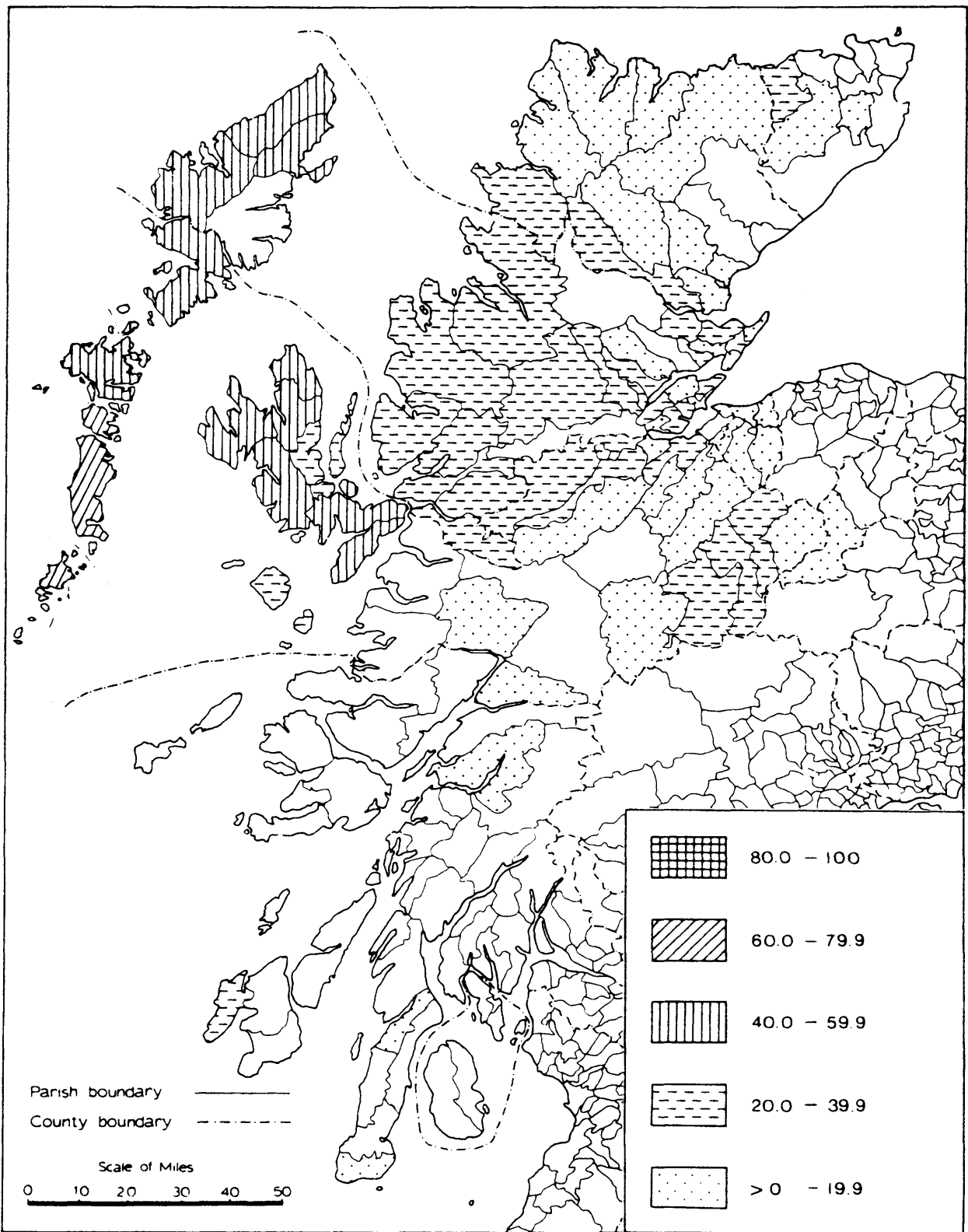


Figure 3 : Persons understanding and speaking Gaelic best and unable to read as a percentage of the parish population, 1822. (Blank parishes are those for which there is no information.)

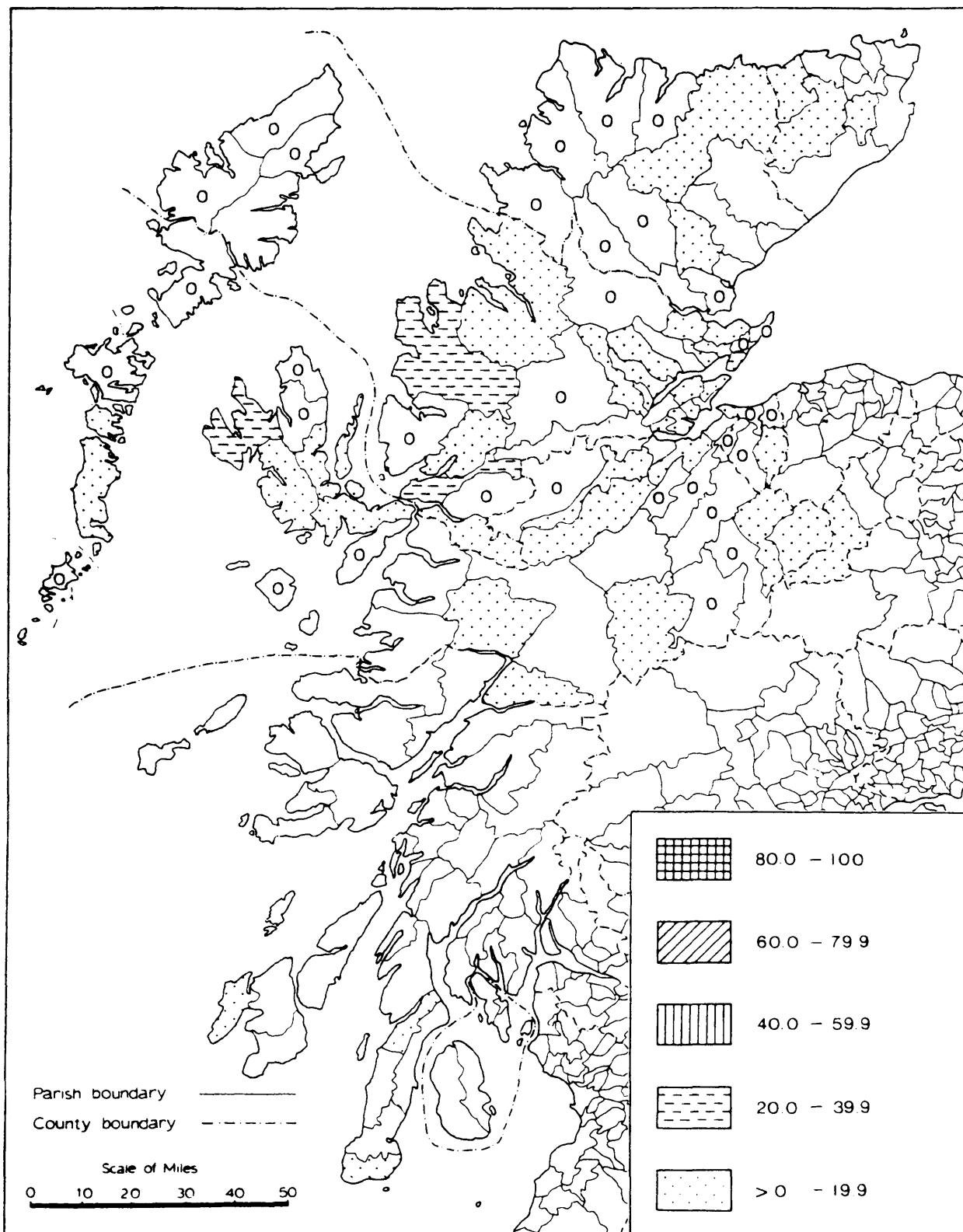


Figure 4 : Persons understanding and speaking English best and unable to read as a percentage of the parish population, 1822. The zero indicates no one in the parish unable to read. (Blank parishes are those for which there is no information.)

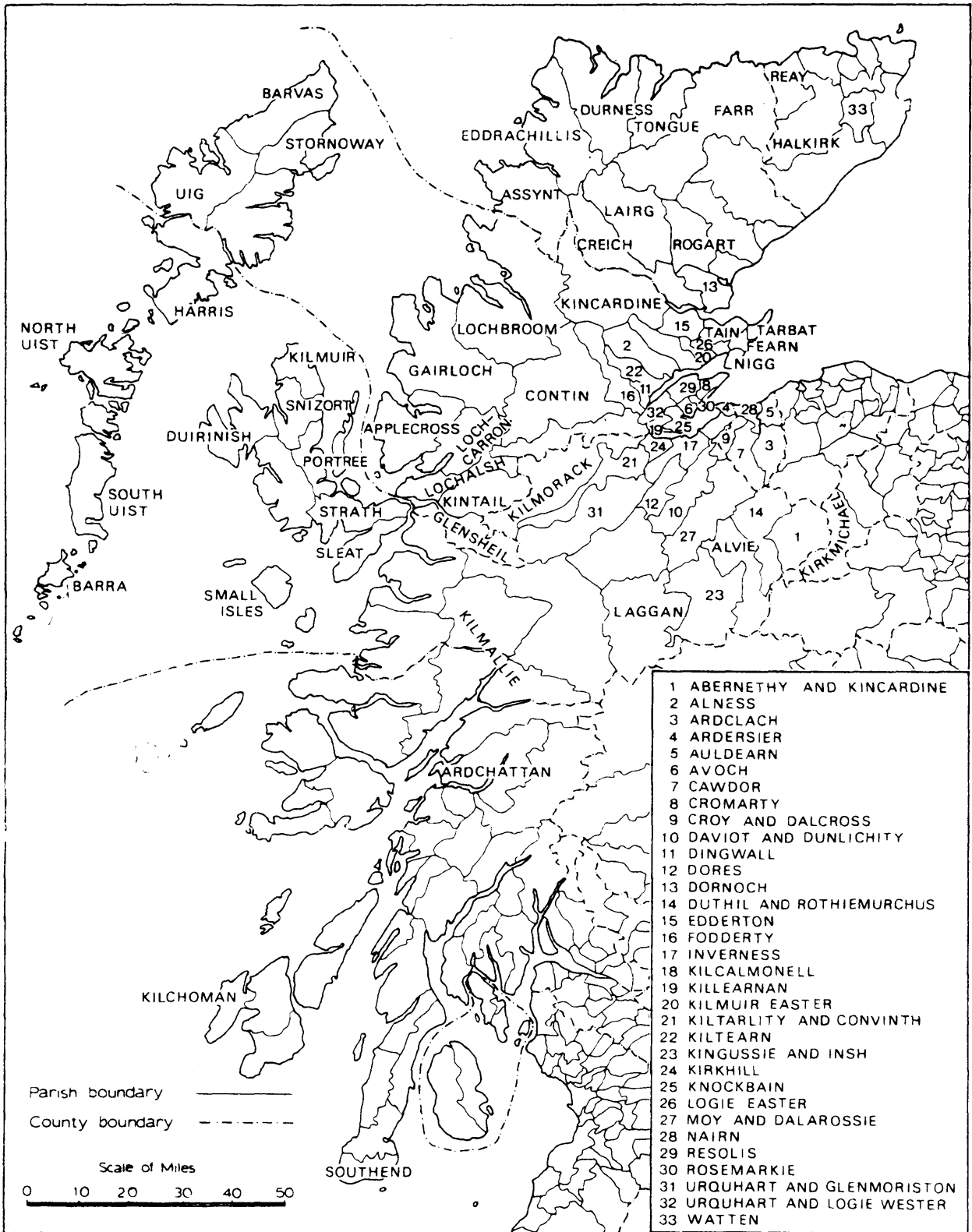


Figure 5 : Parish base-map of the eighty-nine respondent parishes in the 1822 Report.

Fig. 1 shows the percentage of the parish population speaking, or rather 'able to understand best', the Gaelic language; fig. 2 the percentage of the parish population better able to speak the English language; fig. 3 shows the percentage of the parish population who understand Gaelic best but who cannot read, either Gaelic or English; and fig. 4 shows the percentage of the parish population understanding English best who cannot read, Gaelic or English. Fig. 5 may be used to identify the eighty-nine parishes in question. Although one should be wary, as West has pointed out,²⁰ of regarding 'any single set of quantitative statistics as a satisfactory measure of education in itself', this evidence is important for the light it sheds on the relationships between language and literacy in the Highlands.

It is at once evident that Gaelic was much more widely understood and spoken in the Highlands in 1822 than English, except perhaps in several north-eastern coastal parishes such as Avoch, Cromarty and Rosemarkie and in Watten and Kirkmichael parishes in the edge of the Highlands. English was nowhere preferred by 60 per cent or over of the population other than in these five parishes. A comparison of figs 1 and 2 with figs 3 and 4 reveals that literacy, or, at least, the ability to read, bore close relations to the relative prevalence of Gaelic or English. In those parishes where Gaelic was more widely understood than English, inability to read was quite marked. In many of the island parishes where Gaelic was particularly strong, over 40 per cent of the population confessed themselves unable to read either that language or English, and throughout the great part of the northern Highlands, well over a fifth of those who understood Gaelic best and who spoke Gaelic in preference to English were unable to read (fig. 3). Amongst those who understood and spoke English best, however, the general level of reading ability was much higher than amongst the Gaelic population and as the number of parishes with a zero testify (fig. 4), in many parishes where English was better understood, everyone could read, and, in most cases, in both English and Gaelic. Of course, the relative proportions mask the actual numbers understanding or speaking one language in preference to the other in certain parishes, but the overall patterns of a north-west Highlands that is strongly Gaelic with a low level of ability to read in contrast to the eastern Highlands and Highland margins which were strongly English with very high levels of reading ability, cannot be doubted.

In conclusion it is difficult to know just how and why these differences in ability to read should have been so marked, but several points should be noted. English was becoming increasingly common by the early decades of the nineteenth century throughout the Highlands as a result of trade and migration to the Lowlands.²¹ Furthermore, Gaelic texts were relatively few in number at this period and were almost all religious in nature. Such books — a basis to reading ability — were scarce in the Highlands. As the 1822 report reveals, one-third of all families visited were without a copy of the scriptures, in Gaelic or English, and a far greater proportion were without texts at all.²² Nor were such problems unique to Scotland or the nineteenth century. Durkacz has pointed to this separation between the spoken language and literacy in the native language as an important agency in the declining fortunes of the Gaelic languages in general.²³ In the case of Highland Scotland, such books as were widely available were nearly all in English — for those who professed ability in that language, the ability to read was, therefore, much easier to

achieve. Those who preferred or commonly used Gaelic in most walks of daily life had little basis in a Gaelic literature and literary tradition with which to support the spoken language. As figs 1-4 reveal, there was a close relationship between the strength of Gaelic and the degree of illiteracy in the Highlands.

Such a relationship is perhaps not surprising given that Gaelic had long been held in poor regard as a school language and as the language of education. Highland education was synonymous for many with anglicisation, and learning and literacy were things to be sought and achieved through the medium of English, not Gaelic. As one schools' inspector noted in 1824 'There seems to be in the minds of the people, as far as I could ascertain, a very general prejudice against using the Gaelic as a school language, and this prejudice I have observed in its full strength from even the older inhabitants who could themselves use no other language'.²⁴ The ability to read amongst Gaelic or English speakers in the Highlands in 1822 would, of course, have varied as markedly within parishes and perhaps even within families as it has been shown to do by parish. In terms of geographical and social variations by parish across the Highlands as a whole, however, it is clear that important differences existed in the ability to read in relation to the language spoken, and, on this evidence, that 'literacy' and language existed in complex patterns in this part of the British Isles.

NOTES

1. See, for example, D. MacKinnon, 'Education in Argyll and the Isles, 1638-1709', **Records of the Scottish Church History Society**, VI, 1938, pp.46-54; D. Mason, 'Scottish charity schools of the eighteenth century', **Scottish Historical Review**, XXXIII, 1954, pp.1-13; D. J. Withrington, 'The S.P.C.K. and the highland schools in the mid-eighteenth century', **Scottish Historical Review**, XLI, 1962, pp.98-9; M. Macleod, 'Gaelic in highland education', **Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness**, XLIII, 1966, pp.305-34; K. Mackinnon, 'Education and social control: the case of Gaelic Scotland', **Scottish Education Studies**, 4(1), 1972, pp.125-37; F. G. Thompson, 'Technical education in the Highlands and Islands', **Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness**, 48, 1972-4, pp.244-337; V. E. Durkacz, 'Gaelic education in the nineteenth century', **Scottish Educational Studies**, 9(1), 1977, pp.18-28; D. E. R. Watt, 'Education in the Highlands in the Middle ages', in L. Maclean (ed.), **The Middle Ages in the Highlands**, 1981, pp.79-90.
2. V. E. Durkacz, 'The source of the language problem in Scottish education 1688-1709', **Scottish Historical Review**, LVII, 1978, 28-39; V. E. Durkacz, **The Decline of the Celtic Languages**, 1983; Charles W. J. Withers, 'Education and Anglicisation: the policy of the SSPCK towards the education of the Highlander, 1709-1825', **Scottish Studies**, 26, 1982, pp.37-56; R. Houston (forthcoming) **Scottish Literacy and Scottish Identity: Illiteracy and Society in Scotland and Northern England 1600-1800**, is important in setting Highland literacy and education provision in a broader Scottish and European context see especially chapter 6; R. D. Anderson, **Educational Opportunity in Victorian Scotland: Schools and Universities**, 1983; J. Bannerman, 'Literacy in the Highlands' in I. B. Cowan and D. Shaw (eds). **The Renaissance and Reformation in Scotland**, 1983, pp.214-35.
3. Charles W. J. Withers, **Gaelic in Scotland 1698-1981: the geographical history of a language**, 1984; see also R. Houston, *op. cit.*
4. Houston (forthcoming), *ibid.*
5. 'English' in this sense means Scots English.

6. For a general geographical and social survey of such variations since the late-seventeenth century, see Withers, 1984, *op. cit.*
7. Durkacz 1978, *op. cit.*; for an appraisal of this point in regard to Welsh and Irish Gaelic, see chapter 3 — 'Evangelical Religion and the rise of literacy in the Mother tongue' — of Durkacz 1983, *op. cit.*
8. Durkacz 1983, *op. cit.*, pp.45-95; Withers 1984, *op. cit.*, pp.116-60.
9. Durkacz 1978, *op. cit.*, p.31.
10. T. C. Smout, **A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830**, 1969, p.426.
11. I. R. M. Mowat, Literacy, libraries and literature in 18th and 19th century Easter Ross', **Library History**, 5(1), 1979, pp.1-10; for a more detailed examination of language and literacy in this particular region, see also, I. R. M. Mowat, **Easter Ross 1750-1850: the double frontier**, 1981.
12. Mason 1954, *op. cit.*; Withrington 1962, *op. cit.*; Durkacz 1978, *op. cit.*; Withers 1982, *op. cit.*; for a rather limited review of the SSPCK, see also, I. G. Andrews and A. G. Cairns, **A Brief Survey of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge**, 1957.
13. **Annual Report of the Gaelic Schools Society**, 1811, pp.14-28.
14. *Ibid.*, pp.22-8.
15. **Moral Statistics** . . . , p.22.
16. *Ibid.*, p.23.
17. *Ibid.*, p.24.
18. *Ibid.*, pp.24-5.
19. E. G. West, 'Resource allocation and growth in early 19th century British education', **Economic History Review**, 2nd series, XIII(1), 1970, p.74.
20. E. G. West, **Education and the State**, 1965, p.126.
21. Withers 1984, *op. cit.*, pp.100-15.
22. Durkacz 1983, *op. cit.*, pp.122-28.
23. Durkacz 1983, *ibid.*
24. P. Butter, **Journal of a Visit** (Scottish Record Office) GD 95/9/3, p.17.

Why not join

THE LPS SOCIETY

Membership includes the opportunity to buy books by post, including the demographic book of the decade, **The Population History of England 1541-1871** by E A Wrigley and R S Schofield, on terms which make the subscriptions of £6.00 (student members £5.50) an investment.

For further details contact the Honorary Secretary,
Dr Malcolm T. Smith, Department of Anthropology, The University of Durham, 43 Old Elvet, Durham DH1 3HN.

Correspondence addressed to the Treasurer should be sent to:

**Mrs. Grace Wyatt,
 302 Prescott Road,
 Aughton,
 Ormskirk,
 Lancs L39 6RR.**