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A Scottish Border Baptist Church Kelso

IN the story of the founding of Kelso Baptist church we are able to trace three interesting strands. The munificence of a lady who assumed a name, Miss Scott Makdougall of Makerstoun;¹ the strong evangelistic zeal of an unusual man, Rev. James Work, B.A.; and the importunate prayer of a widow, Mrs. Mary A. Binnie.

In 1844 the Baptist Union of Scotland, in its concern for witness in the Borders arranged a mission conducted by Rev. James Blair of Dunfermline and Rev. Francis Johnston of Cupar, Fife. This mission was a great success as far as Kelso was concerned.²

Sir Walter Scott, who knew the Borders, wrote :

“The Kelso folk liked not to hymn and pray
Nor like they't much unto this day.”³

It was not the kind of town whose people responded readily to such missions. The meetings, held in the Friends' Meeting House, were crowded. The Report of the Scottish Baptist Assembly of 1844 says “A gentleman who dwelt in the village of Ekford, was baptized by Mr. Blair, in the River Teviot, during the Mission.”⁴ Following this mission a church was founded which met in a building, now a disused showroom attached to “Braeside,” Bowmont Street. *The Kelso Mail* of March 8th, 1878, recounts a temperance meeting under the chairmanship of Rev. James Work held in “The Baptist Meeting House, Bowmont Street.” This must refer to the original Baptist Meeting house, as the present church was not opened till June 1878. There is a strong local tradition that the showroom attached to “Braeside” was the original meeting place.⁵ On 24th May, 1878, “Braeside with the schoolhouse attached” changed hands.⁶ In the deeds of the house there is no reference to Baptist occupation but because of these facts, there is a strong presumption, amounting almost to certainty, that the schoolhouse was the original Baptist Meeting House in Bowmont Street. Here, on 21st February 1877, the present Baptist church was formed with ten members under the ministry of Mr. Work.⁷

In Edinburgh the Revival of 1859 led to the opening of Dublin Street Baptist church. Present at the service, conducted by Rev. William Brock, D.D., of Bloomsbury, was a lady who was a member of the Episcopal communion.⁸ Her soul was stirred by the beauty of the structure and the warmheartedness of the people. The gentle episcopalian kept coming on Sundays and within two years of the

opening of the church she had applied for baptism and church membership.⁹ Her name was Miss Maria Dorothea Georgina Scott.

In 1877 Kelso was an important agricultural town of five thousand souls. Four miles away was Makerstoun estate. All the male members of the Makdougall family had died. Miss Elizabeth Hay, a cousin, succeeded as heiress and assumed the name of Makdougall. When she died her cousin, Miss Maria Georgina Scott, was declared heiress and assumed the name Makdougall, being known as Miss Scott Makdougall. This was five years after her baptism in Dublin Street. She was the eldest daughter of John Scott, H.E.I.C.S. and Isabella Munro, and grand-daughter of John Scott of Gala and Ann Makdougall his wife.¹⁰

The mansion house, expansive parks, and winding river Tweed became to her a joy. She became possessed of an income ten times greater than the one she had lost, with the failure of the Western Bank, just previous to inheriting Makerstoun.¹¹

The duties and responsibilities of her position as a Christian believer became one of the guiding principles of her new life. In the twenty-seven years that followed, Bible Study, extraordinary liberality, gracious hospitality and temperance enterprise received Christian interpretation. "She reserved for her own private use only a very small income, in order that she might have the means to promote the Glory of God both at home and abroad, amongst all classes of the community, especially in reference to her own denomination."¹²

She learned that the old Baptist meeting house in Kelso had closed some years earlier but was still in existence. She arranged for the joiners from Makerstoun estate to repair the disused building, and sought out so unusual an evangelist as James Work, then of Wick in Caithnesshire. He came to Kelso in 1876. Miss Scott Makdougall fully supported him in all his labours to establish a Baptist cause in Kelso, and promised to provide £100 yearly for ten years towards the stipend of the minister of the Kelso Baptist church. So successful were Mr. Work's evangelistic labours that she decided to build a new church at her own expense. The stones were quarried in Makerstoun estate and carried to Kelso. The new sanctuary was erected on a site purchased by her in Bowmont Street. Engraved on the stone above the entrance was the text "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved."¹³ The cost of the building, £2,000, was borne by Miss Scott Makdougall, and the church was given as a gift to the Baptist Union of Scotland.¹⁴ It was opened on June 23rd 1878.¹⁵

Near her mansion a house was converted into a chapel for the benefit of families of the employees in the estate. It was called "The Gospel Hall." Today it is part of the outbuildings of Makerstoun.¹⁶ On Sundays and weekdays preachers from far and near ministered

there. George Howieson, the house steward,¹⁷ ran a psalmody class and frequently gave the exhortation. Believers from among the families in the estate were baptized in the river Tweed.¹⁸ Missionaries on furlough were refreshed, never departing with empty purses. The river Tweed received the contents of the wine cellar. She defended her action by saying, "As I now look upon alcoholic liquors as poison, I can neither use them personally nor offer them to others."¹⁹ Aged and infirm people from Edinburgh enjoyed the pleasant scenery of the estate. Other Christian proprietors emulated her in such retreats.²⁰

David Ross, the Town Missioner in Kelso, lived opposite the Baptist church. The words engraved on the stone above the door, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved", caused him to search scripture. He became convinced and was baptized. This led to his dismissal. Miss Scott Makdougall appointed him Missionary Assistant to the minister of the Baptist church, Rev. H. E. Croft, who had succeeded James Work. Later Mr. Ross was ordained a minister at Alnwick Baptist church, Northumberland.²¹

A succession of ministers followed Mr. Work. Earnest young Edward Last from Spurgeon's College, London, was called to the ministry of the church. One report speaks of thirty baptisms in one year and many more conversions. The commodious building was filled every Sunday evening. Twelve farmhouses received cottage meetings.²² A few years later Rev. Joseph W. Kemp came from the Bible Training Institute, Glasgow. Mr. Last and Mr. Kemp, married daughters of Mrs. Binnie.

Political, social and religious events, seemed to point to the pre-millenarian advent. With mental powers vigorous, but physical frame weak, Miss Scott Makdougall lay on the couch at Makers-toun, waiting the coming of the Lord. For her He came on 14th May 1890, in her eighty-sixth year.

By the divine blessing Rev. James Work²³ was just the man for the work at Kelso and in four years had established a flourishing Baptist church. There is evidence that he took his share in the civic life of the town. He is named together with the chief magistrate, other ministers of the town and the chairman of the Parochial Board and the Inspector, as one of the Committee "To ease existing distress among the labouring classes."²⁴

He was born in Shapinsay, Orkney Island, On October 29th, 1830. When he was twenty-one he emigrated to America. From a letter printed in the *John O'Groats Journal*, December 1863, which he wrote to a friend in America, we learn :

"I came to America, poor, illiterate, ignorant, a blinded slave of Satan. God in His wonderful mercy called me, by His grace, into the kingdom of His Son, put into my heart to pre-

pare to preach the Gospel, opened up my way, and through the kindness and liberality of His children, gave me the great privilege of studying over eight years. And strange to say shortly after my conversion, when the cholera was raging in Hamilton C.W., where I was working, so strong was my confidence that I should be spared to the Gospel in Orkney, that I had not the least fear of being seized by it. But my confidence was not always thus strong, for sometimes, even during my studies, so severely was my Faith in God and patience tried, that I would willingly have gone back to the world and would have done so, had not God, by His matchless grace, kept me. I would have been as bad as Esau, and sold my hope of Heaven to get rid of the Tempter, who was seeking to destroy my soul. But God kept me, blessed be His glorious name."²⁵

This extract helps us to picture the man, with a deep passion for winning others to the Saviour, a keen desire to be well equipped for the ministry, an absolute trust in God. He graduated B.A. at the University of Rochester, N.Y., U.S.A., in 1860. Three years later he graduated at Rochester Theological Seminary. He was ordained at Nunda church, New York, on 11th February 1863. Within a few weeks of his ordination he set sail for Orkney, because his great desire was to preach the Gospel there. He became a missionary under "The Baptist Home Missionary Society for Scotland, chiefly for the Highlands and Islands." For the next thirteen years he laboured with the Home Mission, itinerating, with his base in Kirkwall. During this period he held settled pastorates for brief periods at Lerwick, Kirkwall and Wick.²⁶ It was just after he had resigned the pastorate at Wick in 1876 that he received the invitation to come to Kelso.

Of his work in Kelso there are few written records. Writing in the *Scottish Baptist Magazine* of 1877, Rev. William Tulloch, the Secretary of the Scottish Baptist Union, said of him: "Our brother is trying to rekindle the flames and to add fresh fuel to the fire, . . . who that feels for human woe and sympathises with the compassionate Redeemer, will not pray that God will speed the noble effort."²⁷ There is also a reference to Mr. Work and Kelso in "Notes on evangelistic work" in the *Scottish Baptist Magazine*, 1877-78.

There is a full account of the opening of the new church in the *Kelso Chronicle* of June 28th, 1878. Mr. Work presided and Rev. S. Newman from Edinburgh preached.

Mr. Work laboured in Kelso for four years then returned to Kirkwall. Here he laboured as a missionary for eleven years, and engaged in literary work. He wrote four books, whose titles are given in *History of Baptists in Scotland*.²⁸ Having spent twenty-nine

years in Scotland he retired to live in Buffalo, New York, without pastoral charge, in 1892. He died in New York on November 21st, 1915, aged 85 years.²⁹

The third strand in the story of Kelso comes from the importunate prayers of a widow, Mrs. M. A. Binnie,³⁰ who for years served the Kelso church. At the age of seventeen she was converted, in Kelso, during the 1859 revival which swept over Scotland. For ten years her Christian life was up and down then God in a wonderful way gave her an assurance which ever sustained her. Every detail of her life was brought to her Lord to decide upon, her answer came invariably from the portion of Scripture she was reading for the day. She was led to baptism through the saintly life of her uncle, John Dewar, for fifty years a deacon in Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh. She and her husband joined Charlotte Chapel. She prayed for revival and believed it would come. To her astonishment God removed her from Edinburgh to another city, her husband having business there. Her soul was in agony for her prayer for revival had not been answered. Thirty years later the God-given revival came to Charlotte Chapel, where her son-in-law, Rev. Joseph W. Kemp, was minister. Her husband died in 1875 a few months after leaving Edinburgh. From then on her home was in Kelso. There was no Baptist church there at the time. She began to pray that God would give to Kelso a Baptist church, her one desire being that it should be a centre of soul-saving in the little community. The Lord gave her as an answer Isaiah 45 : 2, "I will break in pieces the gates of brass and cut in sunder the bars of Iron." She said to the Lord, "But where is the money to come from?" and the Lord answered her from Isaiah 60 : 9, "They shall bring their silver and gold with them." All this was during the years 1875-76. God used Miss Scott Makdougall of Makerstoun, as already related, to build the beautiful church.

In later years three of Mrs. Binnie's sons-in-law ministered in the Kelso church. Rev. Edward Last, Rev. Joseph Kemp and, during the first world war, the other son-in-law, Mr. J. S. Rattray, ministered and did visitation, while at the same time running a very successful business in the town.

In the year 1926, at the age of 84, she left Kelso and travelled to Auckland, New Zealand, to join her daughter and son-in-law Joseph Kemp, who was then minister at Auckland Tabernacle. The Lord took her gently to himself in 1931.

Faithful work has been done for the Master in Kelso by succeeding generations of those who have tried to carry forward the work so wonderfully commenced. Throughout its history the church has keenly supported the Baptist Missionary Society and three of its members have served as missionaries on the Congo field, Dr. Jack T. Gray and Mr. and Mrs. L. Collis, at present serving in Bolobo.

(The writer of this article owes very much to Rev. Edward Campbell, Bellshill, the Convenor of the Scottish Baptist Home Mission. His article in the *Scottish Baptist Magazine*, "The lady with an assumed name", provided the greater part of the second section of this article. He was responsible for unearthing the letter in *John O'Groats Journal* from Rev. James Work.

NOTES

- ¹ Pronounced Ma-KER-ston.
- ² *Baptist Union of Scotland; Report*, 1844. Glasgow, 1844, p. 13.
- ³ J. H. Rutherford, *Photographs of Kelso Scenery, Historical Kelso*, 1883, p. 18.
- ⁴ *Baptist Union of Scotland; Report* 1844, p. 13.
- ⁵ *History of the Baptists in Scotland*. (Ed.) Geo. Yuille. Glasgow, 1926, pp. 138-39. *Scottish Baptist Magazine*, June, 1878, p. 95.
- ⁶ *General Register of Sasines; Applicable to the County of Roxburgh*. Edinburgh. Vol. A, Folio 122, Search Sheet 49.
- ⁷ *History of the Baptists in Scotland*, p. 139.
- ⁸ Edward Campbell, *Scottish Baptist Magazine* (July, 1963), "A Lady with an Assumed Name."
- ⁹ *Scottish Baptist Magazine*, 1890, Bound Vol. I, p. 138.
- ¹⁰ Inscription on tombstone; Makerstoun, private burial ground.
- ¹¹ *Scottish Baptist Magazine*, Bound Vol. I, p. 138.
- ¹² *Kelso Chronicle*, 28th June, 1878, p. 3, col. 2.
- ¹³ *History of Baptists in Scotland*, p. 139.
- ¹⁴ *General Register of Sasines; Applicable to the County of Roxburgh*, Vol. 64, pp. 124ff. Also, *Scottish Baptist Magazine*, May, 1877, p. 170.
- ¹⁵ *Kelso Chronicle*, June 28th, 1878, p. 3, col. 2.
- ¹⁶ Fergus G. Little, "Recollections of Miss Rutherford, Makerstoun. Daughter of Blacksmith at Makerstoun in Miss Scott Makdougall's time." Taken down 29th April, 1963. Kelso Baptist Church File, 1964.
- ¹⁷ George Howieson signed Miss Scott Makdougall's death certificate. Registrar, Smailholm.
- ¹⁸ *Scottish Baptist Magazine*, Bound Volume 1, 1890, p. 138.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- ²⁰ *Scottish Baptist Magazine*, Glasgow, 1877, p. 196.
- ²¹ *History of Baptists in Scotland*, p. 139.
- ²² Edward Campbell, *Scottish Baptist Magazine* (July, 1963).
- ²³ Mrs. A. O. Benkwit, *Alumni Bulletin*, Rochester Divinity School, South Goodman Street, Rochester, New York, U.S.A. Copy Kelso Baptist Church file, 1964.
- ²⁴ *Kelso Mail*, Saturday evening, November 23rd, 1878. *Ibid.*, Wednesday evening, December 21st, 1878.
- ²⁵ Rev. J. Work's letter, *John O'Groats Journal*, December 10th, 1863. Copy Kelso Baptist Church file, 1964.
- ²⁶ *History of Baptists in Scotland*, p. 139.
- ²⁷ *Scottish Baptist Magazine*, May, 1877, p. 196.
- ²⁸ *History of the Baptists in Scotland*, p. 307.
- ²⁹ Colgate Rochester Divinity School; *Alumni Bulletin*. Copy Kelso Baptist Church file, 1964.
- ³⁰ Mrs. W. Kemp (widow of Rev. Joseph Kemp, Auckland, New Zealand, daughter of Mrs. Binnie, Kelso). *Notes gathered from Mother's Diary*. Copy Kelso Baptist Church file, 1964.