
Robert Shanks of Buckie (1798-1884)

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Robert Shanks was a zealous Protestant minister in Buckie, Banffshire, during the middle of the nineteenth century. Many ministers in his day had a greater claim to eminence – Macdonald of Ferintosh, Kennedy of Dingwall, M'Cheyne of Dundee, Archibald Cook of Daviot, William Nixon of Montrose, Hugh Martin, “Rabbi” Duncan, and numerous others, come to mind – but sadly, most of these men, though honoured still in the Church, are largely forgotten by the world, even in their own localities. Shanks, however, is still well known in Buckie, partly because of a large plaque to him in Cluny Square in the centre of the town. The purpose of this article is to give an account of his eventful life.

1. Protestant defender

Robert Shanks was the sixth son of John Shanks, a farmer, and Christine Colquhoun. He was born at Blacksyke in the parish of Slamannan, Stirlingshire on 6th November 1798.¹ Several families of the name Shanks were resident in the parish at that time. There is no record of his parents' burial there so it is possible they moved to Partick when Robert was young. Shanks is supposed to have inherited a “fortune” which helped to pay for his various projects in Buckie.

Shanks entered the University of Glasgow in 1819 but for some reason did not graduate M.A. until 1829. One of his contemporaries

¹ Baptismal Register in Falkirk Library; *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ* (8 vols., 2nd edn., Edinburgh, 1915-50), Vol. 6, pp. 280-1. The *Fasti* erroneously states that Shanks was born in Partick. His parents were married on 1st December 1778 and his eldest brother was born at Cadder, according to the “Shanks Family Genealogy Forum” on the internet.

was William K. Tweedie, later minister of the Tolbooth Church in Edinburgh, who matriculated in the same year.² The Professor of Theology at Glasgow was Dr. Stevenson MacGill who had a formative influence on James Begg: “The very measures which Dr. MacGill continually advocated in the social department relating to pauperism, the treatment of prisoners, education and the economical elevation of the people, were the measures whose advancing afterwards occupied much of the time and thought of Dr. Begg.”³ Shanks’ subsequent career suggests that he too was strongly influenced by MacGill in these respects.

Shanks was licensed by the Presbytery of Linlithgow on 23rd April 1828. He was described as “a giant of a man, handsome and of striking proportions”.⁴ He spent a considerable time on the Continent, as a tutor and travelling companion to a young Highland landowner. While in Paris in the winter of 1829, he attended Guizot’s famous lecture course on the history of civilisation at the Sorbonne.⁵ Shanks ever afterwards “entertained the highest admiration of Guizot’s character and historical prelections”. In France Shanks witnessed Romanism’s “debasement influence over the lower orders and its still more pernicious influence over the educated”.⁶ His experiences in France and acquaintance with French literature led to a conviction that popery and infidelity were closely connected.⁷ He also met Lord Roden, a leading Irish politician, who was seeking to advance the interests of Protestantism in France.⁸

² W. Innes Addison, *Matriculation Albums of University of Glasgow from 1728 to 1858* (Glasgow, 1913), pp. 310-1. An elder brother Thomas matriculated in 1802 but never graduated, *ibid.*, p. 200.

³ T. Smith, *Memoirs of James Begg, D.D.* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1885), Vol. 1, p. 141.

⁴ *Banffshire Advertiser*, 11th April 1929.

⁵ Francois P. G. Guizot (1787-1874). Born into a Huguenot family, he was the author of numerous historical works and also held several prominent Government posts. “Guizot always remained a stern Protestant of the orthodox type although he supported the temporal authority of the Pope,” *British Encyclopaedia* (12 vols., London, 1935), Vol. 5, p. 355.

⁶ *Buckie South United Free Church, Book of the Bazaar, December 1926* ([Buckie], 1926); Rev John MacKay, “Rev Robert Shanks”, *Free Church Monthly Record*, 1st July 1884.

⁷ See W. A. Duncan, *Letter to Rev Mr Shanks of the Reformation Society on the Connexion between Protestantism and Infidelity* (Aberdeen, 1835). Duncan published two further letters to Shanks the same year on “the rule of faith, the sacrifice of the mass, and offering it for the dead” and on “sin and the means of pardon”. William Augustine Duncan (1811-85) was born at Towie, converted to Romanism as a teenager, studied at Blairs, withdrew and became a publisher in Aberdeen, and then emigrated to Australia where he rose to prominence as a writer on religious and political matters (see *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1966, accessible online).

⁸ *Aberdeen Herald*, 12th November 1836. Robert Jocelyn, third Earl of Roden (1788-1870), was an Irish peer who was Grand Master of the Orange Order and the leader of the Irish

Shanks was later a corresponding member of the Evangelical Society of Lisle. In 1833, he published a translation of Peter du Moulin's *Anatomie de la Messe* into English.⁹

In the 1820s Romanism was resurgent in the United Kingdom, particularly in Ireland. Many Evangelicals were greatly concerned and various Protestant Societies were formed, the largest of which was the London-based Protestant Reformation Society (founded 1827). Roman Catholic Emancipation in 1829 gave further impetus to the movement.¹⁰ In November 1833, Shanks was appointed as Scottish missionary for the Protestant Reformation Society, under the supervision of the Glasgow Auxiliary.¹¹ He maintained that the Papists had gained in influence by controversial lectures. For instance, in Aberdeen, lectures on Sabbath evenings had gained many converts, and in the Enzie district on the Banffshire coast, "converts were frequently made in consequence of the Papists being trained in controversy, whilst the Protestants were left uninformed upon the points in dispute".¹²

In the years 1834 and 1835, Shanks travelled around areas of Aberdeenshire and Banffshire with large Roman Catholic populations, giving lectures on the errors of Romanism. Father James Gordon, Tombae, wrote to the local minister, Rev John MacLean, complaining "that hirelings – slanderous and calamitous – nay, seditious and unchristian, under the clothing of a zeal that is false and under the cloak of charity, which is malevolence, circulate lies, misrepresentations and

Tory Peers. He was a noted Evangelical who had "a prominent role in the network of societies which promoted the 'Second Reformation in Ireland'" and who "took a strong interest in the conditions of Protestants on the continent"; see entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁹ Robert Shanks, *The Anatomy of the Mass by Peter du Moulin; newly translated from French, to which is prefixed a Concise History of the Eucharist* (Edinburgh, 1833), xii+288pp. The "Concise History of the Eucharist" occupies exactly a hundred pages and gives a favourable impression of Shanks' education and intellectual powers.

¹⁰ For background, see J. Smith, "Defending the Reformation in Aberdeen (1829-40)", *The Bulwark*, April-June 2011, pp. 15-21.

¹¹ J. Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade in Britain 1829-60* (London, 1991), p. 60. The Protestant Reformation Society was usually referred to at that time as "the British Reformation Society" or simply "the Reformation Society". For its full name, and the new and even longer name that it adopted in 1853, see Wolffe, p. 36. We are using the name by which it has been popularly known since the 1850s. Unfortunately the records of the Society are not currently available for consultation.

¹² Robert Shanks, *Some Causes of Protestant Alarm Stated: and the speeches of the Hon. Lord Moncreiff, and the Rev Principal Dewar, delivered in the General Assembly, on Popery, dissected in a letter to his Lordship* (Edinburgh, 1836), p. 45.

false charges against innocent and unoffending Catholics".¹³ Gordon also objected to the distribution of "calamitous, lying and seditious Tracts" and asked Shanks, "who sent you to roam about, to harangue and ridicule – inveigh and stigmatise – to become a *thorn* – a spur in the side of the ministers of the Established Church of Scotland; a great many of whom could well dispense with your *too officious* services in their churches?"¹⁴

The priest claimed that prior to the arrival of Shanks, there was peace and harmony between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Glenlivet. Protestant farmers even sent their horses and men to plough the priest's fields. He further averred that the tracts were "calculated to disturb the peace of society". Apparently, a local Protestant "denounced, in his zeal, the Pope to be Antichrist, or the scarlet whore, &c. and was gainsayed by a Catholic of my flock who gave him the lie of contradiction. A corn gauge was seized, or attempted to be seized, to run the Catholic through; and had not effectual aid been given, murder might have followed." Furthermore, at Mr George Smith's roup, at Upper Drumin, a local zealot "blew the flame of religious discord then withdrew. Had not Mr Smith intervened, blood, wounds, and even, probably, death, might have ensued between the parties – who provided themselves with lethal instruments, hoops, bars of iron, bludgeons, &c."¹⁵ Father Donald Carmichael, Tomintoul, complained, "you, mountebank-like, paste up your bills against my religion on the corners of the streets".¹⁶

In November 1835, at the height of the M'Ghee and O'Sullivan agitation, Shanks was instructed by the Protestant Reformation Society "on no account to mix up his labours with those of any associations having a political aspect or character".¹⁷ In practice, this was not always

¹³ Robert Shanks, *The Glenlivet Controversy: being a genuine copy of the letters of the Rev Messrs. Maclean and Shanks, and Mr Gordon, priest of Tombae: with an exposure of the ignorance and dishonesty in Mr Gordon's pamphlet: also the letters of Messrs. Carmichael and Maclachlan, priests at Tomintoul and Huntley, with remarks thereon* (Aberdeen, 1835) 48pp. The quotation is on p. 16. Shanks published the "genuine" correspondence (p. 4) because Gordon had published "mutilated copies, full of distortions and attempted emendations" of the letters he had sent to Maclean and Shanks, see [J. Gordon], *Protestantism versus Catholicism: correspondence betwixt the Rev John McLean and the Rev James Gordon* (Aberdeen, 1835). One reason why Gordon had altered his letters for publication, Shanks suggests, is that he was conscious "of having sinned *mortally* against the simple rules of English grammar".

¹⁴ *Glenlivet Controversy*, p. 33.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁷ Wolfe, *Protestant Crusade*, pp. 132-33. For the M'Ghee and O'Sullivan agitation, see *ibid.*, pp. 88-91.

easy to do, nor was there complete unanimity in the Society on the appropriateness of political involvement. Some argued that politics was insignificant compared to the saving of souls from error, while others contended that, given the temporal ambitions of Romanism, it was impossible to avoid political controversy.¹⁸

In November 1836, Shanks organised a public meeting in the South Church, Belmont Street, Aberdeen at which Rev Michael Crotty, a converted Roman Catholic priest from Birr, Ireland was to denounce his former religion. Most of the evangelical ministers of the town were present. Shanks and Crotty had already addressed meetings in Glasgow, Inverness, Elgin, and Forres.¹⁹ Shanks impressed upon the audience the spiritual danger of Romanism. “Was it befitting, he would ask, for any professing Christian to teach that Popery was but a bugbear and fit only to be taught in the nursery to Children? – a system which raises and exalts itself above God! Was it right that such a subject should be turned into profane ridicule? Mr Shanks now presented his Bible, and having turned up the Book of Daniel read from chapter 7 verse 25, asked if that characteristic had not been exemplified in the Church of Rome? He said that he was glad that among the middle classes especially there was a growing sense of the evils of popery; and he could see nothing to prevent Christians of every class from uniting in this holy warfare and continuing to accomplish a great redemption, not only in this country, but in Ireland and in all parts of the world. Mr Shanks sat down amid mingled cheers and hisses.” It seems that Crotty was a rather melodramatic speaker who vehemently denounced Daniel O’Connell and frequently strayed into party politics. He was also collecting money for a new Protestant church in Birr. The meeting was frequently interrupted by hecklers and a controversy arose about Crotty’s credentials, or lack of them.

Eight days later, a second meeting was held – this time in Trinity Chapel, Guild Street, a rougher part of town – principally to refute various “misstatements” regarding Crotty’s character, which had been given extensive coverage in the *Aberdeen Herald* newspaper. Shanks read out several testimonials of character and also sought to prove that the use of the term “Mass” in Crotty’s protestant liturgy was “unexceptionable”. He emphasised that Mr John Duncan of Glasgow, “highly distinguished for his literary attainments” and “a native of, and an honour to, the city

¹⁸ Wolffe, *Protestant Crusade*, p. 133.

¹⁹ *Aberdeen Herald*, 12th November 1836.

of Aberdeen”, approved of the sentiments of the liturgy in question.²⁰ Crotty’s own speech was frequently interrupted and he was called “a liar”, “a renegade” and “a blackguard”. In response, he made “a gross and most unwarrantable attack” on the private character of the editor of the *Herald*, James Adam. Adam sprang to his feet, brandishing his walking stick and bellowing “It’s a lie, it’s a lie, it’s a lie!”. A near-riot ensued, with “contending zealots hauling, pulling and abusing each other in different quarters of the church”. Shanks himself caused “something like general indignation” when he spoke of Lord Stourton as “a nobleman whose ancestor was engaged in the Gunpowder Plot and who himself is still plotting against the Protestant religion”. After being hissed for this statement, he stopped in his speech and called out to the gallery, “I despise those contemptible persons who have no other way of repelling a charge than by a low serpentine hissing”. Such was the disorder in the church that Shanks said he could not pronounce the benediction. Violent behaviour resumed and several windows were smashed. The chairman repeatedly called out that the meeting was dissolved, and having been ignored, sent for the police and town sergeants. Only after Mr Adam had secured a hearing and stated that he would reply to Crotty’s charges later, did the crowd begin to disperse.²¹

2. A challenging parish

Buckie is situated in the parish of Rathven on the Banffshire coast. The modern town grew out of the twin fishing settlements of Easter Buckie and Buckhaven, on opposite sides of the Burn of Buckie and developed by the respective landowners, Gordon of Cluny and Gordon of Letterfourie. Buckie’s motto, appropriately enough, is *Mare Mater*. The fishing villages of Findochty, Portknockie and Portessie are also in the parish. In the post-Reformation period, under the protection of the powerful Gordon family, Romanism regained much ground in Banffshire, and the county has long been fruitful in vocations to the priesthood. St. Gregory’s Church at Preshome was the headquarters of Romanism in Scotland until 1874.²²

²⁰ John “Rabbi” Duncan (1796-1870), the eminent Hebrew scholar and professor in New College, was at that time minister of Milton Church, Glasgow. He was born at Gilcomston, Aberdeen, see D. Brown, *Memoir of John Duncan D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1872).

²¹ *Aberdeen Herald*, 19th November 1836.

²² See P. F. Anson, *Fishing Boats and Fisherfolk on the East Coast of Scotland* (London, 1930), pp. 202-11.

Shanks first visited Buckie in June 1834. He later recalled that he was warned that the people would stone him if he went there. When he arrived it was obvious that the town was not only a stronghold of Romanism but also suffered from poverty, illiteracy, and drunkenness. He held open air meetings on Baron's Green, and addressed the people, not only on the contrast between Romanism and Protestantism, but also on temperance.²³ Shanks challenged Bishop Kyle and his priests to answer his arguments.²⁴ Donald Carmichael, a Roman Catholic physician (presumably related to his namesake, the priest of Tomintoul), organised a meeting in response but he could not complete his speech owing to disorder in the crowd. Shanks refused to debate with Carmichael because he was not an official representative of the Church of Rome. Carmichael, however, wrote of Shanks: "his conduct was always gentlemanly and polite and the appearance of earnestness with which he always carried on his lectures, make me believe he is sincere. And I cannot entertain towards him any other sentiments than those of friendship and respect."²⁵

By the 1830s, Buckie's population numbered around 2,000. Protestant chapels of ease already existed at Enzie and Findochty and the Presbytery had discussed erecting another at Buckie. Shanks' lectures revived the proposal but the proprietor refused a site. However the parish schoolmaster, Rev William Robertson, and Shanks, in the name of the Reformation Society, bought two feus, combined them to provide a site, formed a building committee and issued contracts.²⁶ Although the Duke of Gordon contributed £50, no doubt at the behest of his godly Duchess, most of the cost of £800 was met by subscriptions raised in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool, and other places by the Protestant Reformation Society, hence the "English" inscription on the tower: "Trecenary of the Reformation, 1835".²⁷ The chapel was

²³ *Banffshire Journal*, 13th May 1851.

²⁴ Kyle, the Vicar Apostolic of the Northern District, had a number of young priests gathered around him at Preshome to serve the various Roman Catholic missions in the Gordon country, see D. O. Blundell, *Ancient Catholic Homes of Scotland* (London, 1907), p. 38.

²⁵ D. Carmichael, *A Lecture intended to have been delivered in the Methodist Chapel, Buckie, in answer to the lectures of Rev Robert Shanks* (Elgin, 1834), p. 14.

²⁶ Robertson was born at Migvie, Aberdeenshire in 1804. He was Free Church minister of Aboyne 1844-70; see W. Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland 1843-1900* (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1914), Vol. 1, p. 302.

²⁷ Robert Shanks, *The Trecenary Church of the Reformation, 1835 and the Free Church, Buckie* (n.p. . [1877]), p. 2. The Duchess of Gordon also expressed concern over the increase of popery in Fochabers; see A. Moody Stuart, *Life and Letters of the Elisabeth, Last Duchess of Gordon* (Edinburgh, 1869), p. 127.

seated for 800. Shanks was still travelling on behalf of the Society, but retained a close interest in Buckie chapel, which remained without a minister for two years. The Presbytery reported to the Church Extension Committee: "How to maintain a minister among them remains a mystery when we consider the poverty of the people, their ignorance and the prevalence of Popery among them. It is not to be expected that all that could be realised [for a stipend] would exceed between £20 and £30." Shanks later recalled, "I had witnessed the sad realities and thought this people two hundred years in arrear of Scottish civilisation".²⁸ In the spring of 1837, when working for the Reformation Society in Ireland, he received a communication asking him to take a call to Buckie, and his immediate return was urgently required. Shanks accepted and he was inducted to the new chapel on 6th July 1837.

In visiting his congregation, Shanks discovered that there were 216 adults who did not know the alphabet. The minister later recalled, "from morning till night I taught, repeating the Lord's prayer, the ten commandments, and the creed, requiring the big learners to repeat after me sentence by sentence, till their memories got full possession . . . looking back on this work, I enjoy the hope that many of these once dark disciples have entered into the everlasting rest". There were 400 communicants in 1842.²⁹

The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge established a school in Buckie in 1753. In 1840 the teacher left and not long afterwards the Buckie school was "withdrawn by the Society on the grounds that the schoolhouse had been allowed to fall into decay".³⁰ Shanks started another school in his barn adjoining the house he bought for himself, there being no manse. He initially acted as teacher and often had to run after boys to catch them for their lessons. After the appointment of a teacher he continued to "visit the school each day to see if there were any children in need of chastisement, a duty which Mr Shanks liked to see well done, and which he did himself. It is recorded that he was a much more awe-inspiring figure than the teacher himself and consequently his whippings had a greater effect."³¹ Around this

²⁸ Shanks, *Trecenary Church of the Reformation*, p. 2.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁰ *New Statistical Account of Scotland* (1845), Vol. 13, p. 266.

³¹ *Banffshire Advertiser*, 11th April 1929.

time, the Duke of Gordon offered to present Shanks to one of the parishes over which he exercised Patronage.³²

In 1839 Shanks was once again thrust into controversy. The seven Moderate ministers who formed the majority of the Presbytery of Strathbogie were determined to induct Rev John Edwards to the Parish of Marnoch in obedience to the Civil Courts but against the wishes of the congregation and the instructions of the Commission of Assembly. The rebel ministers were suspended by the Commission and on Sabbath, 22nd December 1839, the suspensions came into effect and ministers were sent to preach their churches vacant.³³ Shanks was to preach in Rhynie and he proceeded to Huntly where he joined four Aberdeen clergymen, Messrs. Gordon, Murray, Spence and Simpson. The Procurator Fiscal and Sheriff Watson of Aberdeen were present in the town along with Messengers at Arms to serve the suspensions and interdicts, and also constables to keep an eye on public order at the churches of the suspended ministers. The Court of Session had already interdicted the Assembly's preachers from using the church buildings.

Shanks arrived at Rhynie on Saturday afternoon, on the minister of Gartly's grey pony. On Sabbath morning, accompanied by the Sheriff, Shanks had bills posted intimating that he was to preach in the square. Over a hundred gathered, although the *Aberdeen Herald* claimed most of them were from other parishes. The pro-Moderate *Aberdeen Journal* claimed that Shanks had distributed anonymous publications criticising the suspended ministers. There follows an example:

STOP! FRIENDS!!

“Let not man prevail.” – Psalm ix. 19.

Two things are in danger, THE PRINCIPLES OF THE CHURCH AND THE PAY OF HER CLERGY.

The Commission deems *the principles* to be more important than the pay; because the Law of God secures the one and the Law of the Land the other. If the two were at variance, which should a Presbyterian people prefer? With a guinea on each eye, can you see the question impartially?

³² Robert Shanks, *The Organ in the Church of Scotland: a Letter to His Grace the Duke of Richmond* (London, 1875), p. 3.

³³ R. Buchanan, *The Ten Years Conflict* (2 vols, Edinburgh, 1861), Vol. 2, pp. 18-52.

What have Presbyterian ministers solemnly promised? To *submit* to Presbyterian Government and Discipline, and to concur with the same, and never to endeavour, directly or indirectly, the subversion thereof, *notwithstanding* of *whatever* trouble or persecution may arise.

The suspended minister, Rev William Allardyce, preached as usual in the church.³⁴

In 1842 Buckie was the largest fishing port on the Moray Firth, with 117 large and 28 small boats.³⁵ Each summer, the men crossed the Moray Firth to Caithness where they fished for a considerable part of the year. The parish minister wrote, “Many of the fishermen are sober, industrious and well behaved men and have laid up considerable savings. Others are thoughtless, and too frequently spend foolishly what they have earned with so much danger and hardship.”³⁶ In 1848, the Buckie correspondent to the *Banffshire Journal* commented, “the only drawback to a fisherman’s advancement is his unremitting visits to the dram shop. The curer generally pays each boats crew for the fish caught during the week, upon Saturday afternoon. Upon receipt of the monies the skipper and crew almost invariably repair to the public house, to pay old scores contracted during the week, and where, in most cases that night and not infrequently part of the Sabbath, is spent in riot and debauchery.” He noted that while other trades were experiencing increasing prosperity, fishermen were falling behind and though their earnings were higher than any other tradesmen or mechanics, they were generally heavily burdened with debts.³⁷ The previous year witnessed serious disorder on the Moray Firth coast following the failure of the potato crop. Mobs tried to seize grain awaiting export at various ports, including Buckie. Sheriff Currie of Banff, following a hearing in Cullen, chastised the culprits, advising them to learn from the Bible how Jacob, in a time of *real* famine, sent his sons to Egypt to buy corn, not to steal it.³⁸

When Shanks first arrived in Buckie, pitched battles in the street were commonplace on Sabbath afternoons. In the face of such violent conduct, Shanks employed a hands-on approach which went well beyond

³⁴ *Aberdeen Herald*, 28th December 1839.

³⁵ J. M. Wilson (ed.), *Imperial Gazetteer of Scotland* (4 vols, Edinburgh, n.d.), Vol. 1, p. 205.

³⁶ *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, Vol. 13, p. 227.

³⁷ *Banffshire Journal*, 14th March 1848.

³⁸ *Banffshire Journal*, 16th February 1847.

speeches on temperance. His successor recalled, “With uncommon bodily strength, great courage, rare perseverance, with a singular power of reading men’s hearts and of managing them, making them do his will when they did not know they were doing it, with an acute observing mind, ready wit, never at a loss for an answer and with a habit of looking far ahead, he devoted himself thoroughly to the good of the place . . . he put an end to evil customs, superstitious observances, penny weddings and Sabbath funerals, stopped fights with drawn knives . . . he often told me he emptied the church for a week or two when he attacked favourite evils, but he never flinched”.³⁹ Especially when the fishermen had made a lot of money, the minister “paid periodical visits to the various public houses in the town and was quick to settle any differences which might arise. One look from the giant minister-policeman was usually sufficient to quell any belligerent spirit and when that did not suffice he had other methods even more effective.”⁴⁰ When drunken fishermen landed in Court, “many a family was indebted to Mr Shanks for pleading their cause and making things lighter for them. . . . He was a friend of Sheriff Gordon in Banff and used his influence in many cases to save people being banished from the country.”⁴¹

In January 1843, Shanks assisted Rev Andrew Bonar, then of Collace, in speaking at non-intrusion meetings in Aberdeenshire. They faced a difficult task because Aberdeenshire was noted for its cold and bitter Moderatism. At Keith-hall, Shanks is reported as having spoken of how “the church must do as the nobles of the land dictate. The parsons they thrust upon us, we must believe, think and act as they bid us. He also informed us of one patron or laird who had some of the church endowments entrusted to his discretion to apply them for religious purposes but instead used them for building roads and bridges.”⁴²

3. Pastor and philanthropist

After the Disruption, Shanks advanced the sum of £60 for a site for a Free Church in the nearby town of Cullen.⁴³ The Duchess of Gordon and the other principal donors asked that the Buckie church should

³⁹ *Banffshire Advertiser*, 24th April 1884.

⁴⁰ *Banffshire Advertiser*, 5th December 1918.

⁴¹ *Banffshire Advertiser*, 5th December 1918.

⁴² *Aberdeen Herald*, 22nd January 1843.

⁴³ *Banffshire Journal*, 31st July 1903.



Rev. Robert Shanks.

[Courtesy of the Buckie District Fishing Heritage Museum]

continue to be used by “Mr Shanks’ congregation”. The congregation told the Established Presbytery that it was willing to return the subscription of any donor who requested it. Although the heritors were content with this, the Established Presbytery initiated legal proceedings over the church building while refusing to be responsible for any debts outstanding. Shanks bought a feu for a church in case the law case went against the Free Church, which in the event, it did. An appeal was launched to construct a new Free Church and schools and during two summers, the minister toured most of the large towns of the south to raise funds.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the Established congregation was

⁴⁴ R. Shanks, *Free Church of Scotland, Buckie* (n.p. , [1850]).

re-constituted and a new minister settled. This congregation is still in existence as the North Parish Church.

Shanks began work on the schools, by unroofing and heightening existing cottages at an estimated cost of £350.⁴⁵ When the tenders for the church came in, the office bearers were anxious about the cost and “none of them could be got to become parties to the contracts. In this emergency he, single-handed, applied to the manager of the bank in Aberdeen, and such was the confidence inspired by his personal application that the banker did not hesitate to grant the required accommodation.”⁴⁶ The church, adjoining the schools and with a frontage onto the High Street including a tall spire, was seated for 1,060 and cost £1,250. It is now known as the South and West Parish Church. The dressed stones were brought from Morayshire in fishing boats and the women carried them up from the harbour on their backs. The church was opened on 15th December 1850 by Rev James Bryce of Free Gilcomston Church, Aberdeen, who preached from Haggai 2:9, “The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts”.⁴⁷ The congregation were “highly indebted to a neighbouring proprietor, of a distinctly different persuasion as regards religion, for the promptitude with which he granted the use of a quarry upon his estates for the erection of the building”.⁴⁸ The schools were later converted into church halls.⁴⁹ The congregation incurred heavy debts through having to build a second church within ten years. By 1853 the annual income of the congregation was £190 13s.⁵⁰

Notwithstanding the town’s thriving fishing industry, the lack of an adequate harbour led to the loss of many boats and several lives in stormy weather. On several occasions, the brawny minister helped to haul men ashore from wrecked vessels on the rocks.⁵¹ In 1845, the proprietor, Colonel Gordon of Cluny was asked by the fishermen if he would improve the harbour. He instead suggested they should do

⁴⁵ W. Barclay, *The Schools and Schoolmasters of Banffshire* (Banff, 1925), p. 119.

⁴⁶ *Banffshire Advertiser*, 5th June 1890.

⁴⁷ James Bryce was born in Renfrew in 1792. He was the schoolmaster of St. Ninian’s, Stirling, before being ordained to Stamfordham, Northumberland, in 1829. He came to Aberdeen in 1835, in succession to Dr Kidd. See F. Lyall and W. Still, *History of Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen, 1868-1968* (Aberdeen, 1967), pp. 8-11.

⁴⁸ *Banffshire Journal*, 24th December 1850.

⁴⁹ Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. 2, p. 194

⁵⁰ *Imperial Gazetteer of Scotland*, Vol. 4, pp. 644-45.

⁵¹ *Banffshire Journal*, 2nd April 1878.

something themselves and asked Robert Shanks to take charge. The minister led the fishermen in constructing a wooden harbour. It consisted of “a small basin about one and three quarter acres in extent, excavated out of the rocky shore sheltered by a light timber breakwater filled in with rubble stone at the expense of £950”.⁵² “The reverend gentleman very often gaffered the men himself and it was no unusual sight for him to be seen with pick or shovel in his hand. Each boat’s crew contributed so much towards the undertaking, but the pier was rather low and possessed little or no weight to counterbalance the buoyancy of the timber, so that in the course of half a dozen years, a storm washed it away. This was a severe blow to Mr Shanks who had to pay the most of the cost of £950 out of his own pocket for its erection.” The open wooden piers did not provide shelter in a storm and boats at their moorings had to be pulled up on the beach. Boats at sea could not head for the harbour and had to seek shelter elsewhere.⁵³ From 1849, Shanks preached an annual sermon on behalf of the Shipwrecked Mariners Benevolent Society.

By August 1853, the *Banffshire Journal* commented that the harbour had “proved totally unfit to withstand the storms of the Moray Firth and is now in such a ruined condition as to be utterly useless. In consequence, the fishermen have no place of landing their boats, but must take all the risk and labour connected with beaching them every time they return from the sea.” The same article pointed out that there was no adequate harbour between Lossiemouth and Banff – a distance of some forty miles.⁵⁴

Shortly after his arrival in Buckie, Shanks, with the aid of his walking stick on a rainy day, explained the benefits of sanitation, which had never been heard of before in the town.⁵⁵ In July 1848, he drew up a Memorial to the Board of Trade, on behalf of the fishermen of Buckie which was signed by over 400 men. It objected to a treaty with the French government which gave them fishing rights within three miles from the British coast, in exchange for British fishermen being allowed to dredge for oysters off the French coast.⁵⁶

⁵² Capt. J. Washington, *Report on the Loss of Life and on the Damage Caused to Fishing Boats on the East Coast of Scotland in the Gale of 18 August 1848*, British Session Papers, LI 177-97.

⁵³ George Hutcheson, *Days of Yore: Buckie and District in the Past* (Buckie, 1887), pp. 54-5.

⁵⁴ *Banffshire Journal*, 23rd August 1853.

⁵⁵ *Buckie South United Free Church, Book of the Bazaar*.

⁵⁶ *Banffshire Journal*, 11th July 1848.

In 1853, on 7th June, Shanks married Mary Fulton, a native of Lanarkshire, who was his junior by nearly thirty years. They had a family of five daughters and two sons.⁵⁷ One of the daughters, Margaret, was married to Rev John P. Berry, Free Church minister of Ceres.⁵⁸ Another daughter, Christian, was married to James Milne, banker, of Garmouth.⁵⁹ Both the sons attended the Chanonry House School in Old Aberdeen. John inherited the pioneering spirit of his father and emigrated to South Africa where he became an ostrich farmer in the Transvaal. In 1899 he was “commandeered” by the Boers, but escaping, he joined Driscoll’s Scouts. He was subsequently killed in an ambush. His copious diaries were published posthumously as *Vagabond Sketches in South Africa*.⁶⁰

In 1854, in view of the imminent outbreak of the Crimean War with Russia, the Government formed the Royal Naval Coast Volunteers, which would consist of 10,000 men including 1,500 in Scotland. To that end, Captain Craigie, R.N., addressed public meetings in coastal towns, at which names of intending volunteers were taken. The Buckie fishermen, however, had long memories and recalling the Napoleonic Wars, feared that they would be press-ganged into the navy. The patriotic Shanks was happy to dispel their fears. He told them that having read the advertisements placed by the Navy, he realised that it was “a plan for keeping the fishermen at home to guard their own homes and firesides while the enemy was being faced by our fleets in the Black Sea, and, it may be, in other distant seas. It were possible that, when our fleets were at a distance, the enemy might seek to make a descent on our coast; but I saw at once that the very thing to deter him was the knowledge that, though the fleets may be at a distance, our shores were guarded by those who had the greatest interest in their defence.” He went on, “So well do I think of the project that, if it were right and lawful, I should be quite

⁵⁷ The 1871 Census records the residents of 21 Church Street, Buckie, as: Rev Robert Shanks, 70; Mrs Mary Shanks, 42; Christian, 16; Margaret, 14; Mary Jane, 12; Isabella, 11; Jessie, 9; John, 7; Robert, 5; Jane Smith (governess), 19; Ellen Mitchell, 20; and Jane Riach, 23 (servants).

⁵⁸ Berry was born in Aberdeen in 1852. He was ordained to Ceres, Fife, in 1879 and translated to Colliston in 1913. He died in 1914; see Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 95; J. A. Lamb, *Fasti of the United Free Church of Scotland, 1900-1929* (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 398.

⁵⁹ They later moved to “Speybank”, High Wycombe, where Christian died on 23rd June 1924.

⁶⁰ Alexander Shewan, *Spirat Adhuc Amor* (Aberdeen, 1923), p. 411.

willing to be one of the volunteers myself! . . . and let me say that I have no doubt whatsoever of the good faith of the Government. In this country there can be nothing like trickery in our Government. (Cheers) All is honest, open, and fair. (Cheers).”⁶¹

In 1857 the magnificent new St. Peter’s Roman Catholic Chapel was opened in Buckie. Its twin-spired west front, modelled on Elgin Cathedral, dominates the western approach to the town. It was nicknamed “the twa horns o’ the beastie” by the Protestant fishermen.

4. Storm over Buckie

During the winter of 1857-8, the issue of the poor financial contributions of the Buckie congregation was raised at various Assembly Committees, and the Free Presbytery of Fordyce was asked to make enquiries. Certain members of the congregation raised additional concerns about the minister’s conduct. On 5th and 6th May 1858, the Presbytery, along with a deputation from the Free Synod of Aberdeen, met “to enquire into certain matters connected with the ministerial duties and finance matters” of Robert Shanks. Shanks told the Presbytery that he intended to demit his charge. To allow him to settle his temporal affairs, the Presbytery agreed that his resignation would not come into effect until Martinmas. The Presbytery later claimed his resignation was “wholly voluntary and there was neither bodily weakness nor mental excitement apparent”.⁶² His supporters alleged that the investigation was biased against Shanks. While his opponents were “chambered with the Presbytery in the Manse of Cullen for an hour before the public meeting” his supporters had no opportunity to speak up for him. They claimed that their minister was “weak and excited and in great need of counsel”.⁶³ Moreover, they objected “it was notorious not only that Mr Shanks was so concussed in the so-called court, but that during the short interval of the second day, when he might have had leisure and opportunity for calm reflection, he was followed into his house by a member of the Court, and even there the pressure was continued till his consent was extracted”.⁶⁴ “A thrill of grief ran through the town on announcement of his intention to leave. . . . We must, however, say that

⁶¹ *Banffshire Journal*, 31st January 1854; Hutcheson, *Days of Yore* p. 27.

⁶² *Banffshire Journal*, 15th February 1859.

⁶³ *Banffshire Journal*, 8th March 1859.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

some of the demonstrations shewn, especially by the female sex, were by no means very becoming, and quite unchristian. Stones had been thrown, banns pronounced, and vengeance threatened by members against members of the same congregation.”⁶⁵

Shanks' resignation came into effect on the term day of Martinmas which was 22nd November.⁶⁶ On 8th November, a “pretended congregational meeting”, called by the Deacons' Court and chaired by an elder, had given notice to Mr Dow, the teacher, who was opposed to Shanks. The majority party were allegedly keeping their children away from the school. At the next Presbytery at Cullen, two hundred of Shanks' congregation turned up at the meeting in support of a petition to annul the resignation. In spite of much protest, the Presbytery insisted that the resignation having taken effect, the matter was beyond their power to alter. It was later claimed that many of the minister's supporters returned to Buckie “in a state of intoxication. The noise and squalling on their way home was disgraceful . . . their rejected petition was lost, it is said, at or near a public house.”⁶⁷ Rev Archibald Smellie (Banff) was appointed to preach the church vacant the following Sabbath 28th November. Shanks' supporters, “in the belief that if Mr Smellie gained admission all would be lost . . . from the moment of their return home guarded the church with a jealous wakefulness”. When the official party arrived at Buckie, they found the church doors firmly locked and a determined crowd outside. It was claimed that a number of youths were “hired with sweeties to make a noise and cry all kinds of abusive language”. Smellie considered holding the service in the adjoining school, and obtained the key from Mr Dow. While attempting to enter the school, one of the party, Mr Bremner, Inspector of Poor, not the most popular man in Buckie at the best of times, had the key grabbed from him and was roughed up by “infuriated fish wives”. One, in passing Smellie, threatened a blow with her fist, crying, “Ye needna come here”; another at same time, at a little distance, exclaiming, “*Them* come here to preach the Gospel!”. Smellie was also allegedly called “a devil” by several women. He considered holding a service outside the front door but he

⁶⁵ *Banffshire Journal*, 8th May 1858.

⁶⁶ The Church festival of Martinmas is 11th November, but following the change of the calendar and the loss of eleven days in 1752, the term day of Martinmas in Scotland was for legal purposes reckoned to be 22nd November.

⁶⁷ *Aberdeen Free Press*, 24th December 1858.

decided that “to have attempted to worship God in the state of excitement prevailing would have been little short of desecration”.⁶⁸

One of Shanks’ elders then read a statement on behalf of the Trustees of the church claiming that the Presbytery had no right to preach the charge vacant when they had lodged a protest and appeal at Cullen. Smellie decided that discretion was advisable and simply declared the church vacant, intimating that a service would be held at 2 p.m. at Hilton Farm, the home of Mr Hector, a leading opponent of the minister. Although Shanks refused to preach because a service was being held at Hilton, he held a prayer meeting in a field near the church. “So many being here met, there is propriety in hearing what the God of Heaven says to every man, as all men must stand at the judgement seat of God. . . . The countenances of almost all give plain signs of concern this day. I therefore read what should be comforting to every man who expects to meet Almighty God. I read the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John . . .”⁶⁹ Shank’s opponents claimed that people were “threatened with personal violence” if they went to Hilton and that many of those who did were compelled to return home by a circuitous route to avoid passing the church where, by then, an “immense mob” had gathered. Those who made the mistake of going home from the official service by way of the High Street were “assailed by every opprobrious epithet”.⁷⁰ Shanks also held a prayer meeting in the Seatown at 7 p.m. at which “he expressed thanks to God for the noble testimony that had been borne on his behalf that day”. In addition, Shanks continued to administer the sacrament of baptism, with the agreement of the Interim Moderator.

Rev Alexander Robb, probationer, was appointed to supply Buckie but failed to meet with general acceptance and the church remained firmly closed.⁷¹ One elder objected: “A greater piece of intrusion was never manifested than to force on them a gentleman whom they knew nothing about.” Official services were moved to a chapel at Arradoul where around two hundred were usually in attendance. The minister’s supporters held prayer meetings, led by the elders, in a hall. Shanks usually participated as a member. On the second Sabbath of December,

⁶⁸ *Banffshire Journal*, 4th January 1859.

⁶⁹ *Banffshire Journal*, 30th November 1858.

⁷⁰ *Aberdeen Free Press*, 24th December 1858.

⁷¹ Robb was born at Peterhead in 1815. He worked with his brother in the fish trade and was later a teacher. He was ordained to the charge of Pluscarden in 1859 and died in 1884; see Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 299.

a rumour circulated around daybreak that the locks of the church had been forced. Soon, several hundred people had assembled at the church and they occupied the building until the hour of service arrived. Robb appeared but “there was so general a demurer that the reverend gentleman, who conducted matters very courteously, deemed it the most prudent course to withdraw”. Shank’s supporters objected to the fact that Robb was clearly taking sides by residing at Hilton farm with Mr Hector and by hissing the pro-Shanks deputation at the Presbytery. It was claimed that during the incident outside the church he had challenged some of the crowd to fight, saying “that he would tak’ up ony twal’ o’ them as a boxer an’ lay upon them”. Robb stated at the Presbytery, that he was “told not to come [to Buckie] or my head would be broken . . . some of the parties I see around me today, and, in justice, I think they ought to have been called before a civil court for their conduct towards myself that day”.

Petitions were received from both supporters and opponents at two rather rowdy Presbytery meetings. The fishermen wanted the minister to be allowed to occupy his pulpit until the case was settled. Their ignorance of procedures caused great amusement to the other party and they were subjected to considerable sarcasm and mockery. One man exclaimed: “Mr Dow is laughing there. You need not laugh. There will be a day of judgement yet.” There was a lengthy discussion about the validity of names on the petition of people who were resident temporarily on the north side of the firth, i.e. in Sutherland and Caithness for the herring season. Shanks’ opponents stated that he was “using the congregation as a tool – working them as his tool” and claimed that almost all of Shanks’ supporters had not paid their seat rents since the church was opened. It was alleged that Shanks had “fomented and encouraged opposition” to the Presbytery.⁷² On the other hand, there were allegations about Robb’s conduct, and Mr Hector was asked, “How much bribery have you used, for the few you have got, with your potatoes and turnips?”⁷³ At the Synod of Aberdeen, there were further appeals from both parties. While sustaining the Presbytery’s refusal to cancel the resignation, the Synod referred the whole matter to the forthcoming Assembly.

The 1859 Assembly was presented with a petition from 800 people asking for Shanks’ reinstatement, and his opponents were refused

⁷² *Banffshire Journal*, 7th and 14th December 1858, 4th January 1859.

⁷³ *Banffshire Journal*, 15th February 1859.

permission to bring the issue of the occupancy of the church to the Court of Session. Given the complex nature of the issue, the Assembly took the extraordinary step of appointing a Special Commission, which met in Buckie on 14th and 15th June 1859 in the Free Church School. Shanks' supporters gathered *en masse* in the church, awaiting the result. The Commission decided that in case of disturbance it would be prudent to stay overnight in Fochabers. It was a formidable group of men and included Robert Candlish (Moderator), James Buchanan, James Begg, Davidson (Lady Glenorchy's, Edinburgh), MacKenzie (Dunfermline) and William Wilson (Dundee). Candlish began proceedings by emphasising the seriousness of the situation which had arisen. The case, he said, "has drawn towards it the eyes of scoffers and profane men, the hearts of God's people have been deeply grieved, deeply vexed and wounded and I am very sure the friends of the Free Church have had to hang their heads in very shame when the name Buckie is pronounced, for some time back".

Shanks faced numerous accusations: undertaking manual labour to the neglect of his clerical duties, financial irregularities, claiming the manse as his private house, neglect of visiting, laxity of church discipline, and encouraging opposition to the presbytery following his resignation. Candlish emphasised that if the accusations were found to be "frivolous, unfounded, involving no serious charge" then "the way was open to ask, should the minister's resignation be recalled?"

Shanks' opponents claimed that when the harbour was being built in 1845, he "wrought with pick, axe and shovel, as an ordinary workman", not every day but "very often, and habitually". The minister allegedly went down to the shore at low tide at 4 or 5 a.m. to quarry stones. He was seen working "without coat, hat or neckcloth", and "latterly attired as other labourers with hairy cap and strong navvie boots", which, his opponents claimed, "was injurious of his usefulness as a minister". He was so much engaged on the harbour construction that he excused himself from Presbytery on the grounds that "It is stream tide".⁷⁴ Shanks was noticed "on top of houses, unroofing them, throwing up stones on the scaffold and filling barrows and carts". His supporters admitted that the minister helped out but claimed he was at the harbour "for an hour or two, but never a whole day", mainly assisting with heavy lifts. He worked at the harbour "say twenty days in one year". He also

⁷⁴ *Aberdeen Free Press*, 24th December 1858.

admitted he “might have lent a hand” when his gardener was carting manure. His opponents claimed that the minister’s secular labour had an impact on the quality of his sermons which were “not well connected, and were lacking heads”.

The minister apparently dealt with many cases of discipline by calling in one or two elders instead of the whole session and cases of drunkenness were sorted out privately by the minister. Claims of financial irregularities were dismissed as “great laxity” in record keeping rather than “intentional fraud”. The extreme lack of money had led to Shanks obtaining loans on his own account, and having such an interest in his house that he treated it as his own property rather than as a manse. He agreed to having it declared wholly the property of the church. It is obvious that record keeping was not his forte. In 1875 it was stated that there was no complete communion roll in existence and written minutes were not kept for at least sixteen years previous to that date.⁷⁵

After his resignation, Shanks was accused of “fomenting defiance of the Presbytery’s authority” and “instigating the parties who were guilty of riotous conduct and of profane and threatening language on the Lord’s Day”. In his preaching before his resignation took effect, Shanks purportedly made personal allusions to his opponents such that they stopped attending his services.

The Commission decided to restore Shanks to his charge and, while critical of his management of the congregation, expressed sympathy in respect of the burdens he bore almost single-handed. Buchanan commented, “we can understand, and even appreciate circumstances in which Mr Shanks engaged in secular labour . . . however the business of a minister is to do the work of the ministry”. Mackenzie, who was formerly minister of Drumblade, recalled: “When Mr Thorburn of Forglen and myself used to speak of Buckie we could not for the life of us understand how Mr Shanks could have taken upon himself the work he had done and the risks he had run even with the aid of a fortune.” Begg urged the office bearers to bear a greater share of the practical work. The Presbytery was censured for holding the private meetings.⁷⁶

The *Banffshire Journal* commented, “Mr Shanks sinned from excess of zeal” and suggested that heavy debts of the congregation as a result of erecting two churches in succession led to the minister taking on

⁷⁵ *Banffshire Journal*, 20th April 1875.

⁷⁶ *Banffshire Journal*, 21st June 1859.

extra responsibilities. His enthusiasm “overcame all notions of clerical decorum”. “He would have had his speciality in an African or back-woods mission, where he would have been at once prophet, priest and king.”

The minority group, numbering some one hundred and fifty, applied to be received by the United Presbyterian Presbytery of Banffshire. The Free Church was reopened and Rev James MacKenzie, Dunfermline,⁷⁷ and Rev David Dewar, Bellie,⁷⁸ officiated until the August Commission of Assembly rubberstamped the reappointment of Robert Shanks. Shanks preached for the first time in many months on Job 36:2: “Suffer me a little, and I will shew thee that I have yet to speak on God’s behalf.”⁷⁹ The *Aberdeen Free Press*, which supported the liberal wing of the Free Church, commented, “The party opposed to Mr Shanks are understood to be the more wealthy and willing in the congregation and throughout the Enzie district – and indeed from Banff to Elgin – there is but one feeling of astonishment expressed by persons acquainted with the state of matters for some years past in Buckie”.⁸⁰

5. The later years

The influence of the 1859-60 Revival was felt throughout Scotland, but nowhere more so than on the North East coast. The movement first affected in Buckie in February 1860. It was reported the excitement was “quite unequalled, it is believed, by anything which has yet taken place in Scotland”. Shanks agreed to have the Peterhead cooper turned Revivalist lay-preacher James Turner speak in his church and also had the adjoining schools heated up so that those under spiritual concern could speak to the revivalist afterwards.⁸¹ However Shanks insisted on conducting the services himself. In the middle of his sermon, Turner attempted to give out a hymn, Shanks objected, “remarking that no one

⁷⁷ Mackenzie was born at Barry, Angus, in 1817 and ordained to Dalbeattie in March 1843. He was translated to Annan in 1844 and to Dunfermline Abbey in 1849; see Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 239.

⁷⁸ Dewar was born at Markinch, Fife, in 1796 and became chaplain to the Duchess of Gordon in 1830. He was ordained to Bellie in 1837 and adhered to Free Church 1843; see Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 136. The Duchess spoke of him as “a true Nathaniel”. His obituary is in the *Huntly Express*, 9th May 1885.

⁷⁹ *Aberdeen Free Press*, 19th August 1859.

⁸⁰ *Aberdeen Free Press*, 24th June 1859.

⁸¹ *Reminiscences of the Revival of 1859 and the Sixties* (Aberdeen, 1909), pp. 71-5; T. Lennie, *Glory in the Glen: a History of Evangelical Revivals in Scotland* (Fearn, 2010), pp. 196-99.

could pen anything as good as the Psalms". The minister also endeavoured to calm the growing excitement but was accused of "hindering the Holy Spirit". He then spoke on the duty of self-examination but disturbances resumed and there were calls to withdraw to the United Presbyterian hall. Eventually the police arrived and cleared the church, one pew at a time. "The great majority went to the United Presbyterian congregation's hall and commenced a regular revival meeting."⁸²

The Free Presbytery of Fordyce asked for reports on the Revival from the congregations within its bounds. The Buckie Session stated, "On the minister's return to public duty, the subject of family and personal religion was strongly pressed from the pulpit . . . religious feeling and spiritual fruit became more manifest". Some of the early district meetings witnessed prostrations (which Shanks argued were caused by fasting and walking long distances), "the chanting of hymns to expel fiends or produce holy raptures, and a great variety of prayers and ejaculations by both men and women". Shanks found that most of those prostrated were unable to connect the experience with conviction of sin. He believed that these novelties "being neither scriptural nor in agreement with the doctrine and worship found to be agreeable to the will of God" should have no place among his people, and ensured that the Free Church meetings were conducted in an orderly and reverent manner. Some of the most "ardent and artful" were offended and left the church, but most remained and the church meetings "were characterised by great regularity of attendance, and by earnest attention to the Word read and preached . . . none of what are called the revival hymns were sung, rarely any paraphrases, usually the psalms only".⁸³

It has been claimed that after his appointment to Buckie, Shanks "avoided religious controversy and the bitter feelings which had been aroused against him among the Roman Catholic section of the community soon disappeared and some of his former opponents were afterwards counted as his warm friends".⁸⁴ While his congregational duties placed many additional demands on Shanks he continued to maintain a witness against Rome. In 1865, in an echo of his early years in the ministry, Mr McCourt, a converted Roman Catholic priest, addressed two meetings in Shanks' own church. During the first lecture,

⁸² *Banffshire Journal*, 28th February 1860.

⁸³ *Banffshire Journal*, 10th April 1860.

⁸⁴ *Banffshire Advertiser*, 24th April 1884.

on Transubstantiation, “very unbecoming conduct” was witnessed outside the church and Shanks twice went to the doors to remonstrate with them. After the meeting, the speaker was “greatly insulted and threatening language was used towards him” and was struck with stones on his way to his lodgings. The next morning he was “hunted on the street and terribly threatened”. At the close of the second meeting, on the Worship of Mary, as the congregation was singing Psalm 46, “the stones were coming in through the windows”. Shanks rose and said that “he had lived peaceably with the Roman Catholics of Buckie for a number of years but their conduct that night was a rebuke for his long silence”. Shanks “then engaged most earnestly in prayer for a few minutes, imploring the Almighty to protect them all as they left the church, and at all times”.⁸⁵

During his ministry in Buckie, Shanks was a member of the Rathven Parochial Board, which administered poor relief. At a meeting on 7th November 1871, several wealthy farmers who were Board members, attempted to relieve the landward part of the parish from paying for the poor in the coastal villages and “put the whole burden on tenants and house proprietors which would be ruination to the inhabitants of Buckie”. Shanks argued that taxation must take account not only of the rental of a person’s property, but also of their capital. He thought the proposed measure “would raise a great deal of contention in the parish and set one class of people against another. There was nothing like peace and harmony in the country. . . . The state of much of the population, perhaps should render them very circumspect before giving any grounds of irritation amongst them, so that they might escape the troubles that had taken place in some foreign countries.”⁸⁶

Although the motion was defeated, its proponents intended to reintroduce the matter at the next meeting of the board scheduled for 25th January. A public meeting of the whole population of Buckie as well as the other villages was announced, to be held in the Square outside the Board’s offices, on the same morning. An excitable crowd of between two and three thousand gathered. Several board members met in the nearby hotel, and having seen the crowd, which they believed was an attempt at intimidation, considered it unwise to pass through the people to attend

⁸⁵ *Huntly Express*, 2nd February 1865.

⁸⁶ *Banffshire Journal*, 14th November 1871.

the meeting. When Shanks arrived, one member said, "You have been at the bottom of this!" and claimed that at the November meeting the minister had "made an allusion to the state of France, and used the words physical force and Revolution". In fact, it was subsequently confirmed that two local businessmen had paid for the town crier to announce the meeting. Shanks believed that he had been vindicated – in spite of "a pretence of great mystery or plotting" regarding the meeting, "now the mystery was evaporated into air".⁸⁷

Some board members decided to attempt to go down to the office and hold the meeting as intended but were pushed and shoved and the crowd purportedly tried to crush them. Two policemen were also roughly handled. Because of his influence over the fishermen, Shanks was asked to attempt to calm down the crowd. There were cries of "Let them come and speak and no be like thieves and dee things ahin' folks' backs" and the minister said that he was in favour of holding the meeting in the Square. The other members, however, were unwilling to do this. Two board members who were prominent advocates of the unpopular motion, were pelted with stones and clods of earth before being chased out of town and across the fields. When one of them took refuge in a farmhouse a crowd surrounded the building, smashed the windows, attempted to put the door in and allegedly threatened to burn down the farm. The authorities were greatly concerned and considered calling out the Volunteers to disperse the mob. The riot even came to the attention of Parliament. In spite of the obvious drama, none of the board members had significant injuries.

Subsequently ten people were arrested and appeared before the High Court at Aberdeen charged with mobbing and rioting. The minister appeared as a witness and tried to play down the affair. "I did not notice crushing or pushing. I spoke to all the people I could on the square, and none of them intended to make a riot," he recalled. "They are a peaceable people. There has been no police case during the last year." One of the accused was a woman. Shanks said of her, "There is a hereditary defect in respect of intelligence". He went on, "And what do you say to 'Gibb Tam'? He's weak. He has a deficiency in hearing. I know the other boys . . . they are, and always have been, considered decent lads." The verdict was "not proven".⁸⁸

⁸⁷ *Banffshire Journal*, 13th February 1872.

⁸⁸ *Banffshire Journal*, 13th February and 30th April 1872.

In December 1874, a congregational meeting was held to elect a colleague and successor to Shanks. In January 1875 the Free Presbytery of Fordyce met in Buckie to moderate in a call to Rev Alexander Miller, assistant at Free St. Stephen's, Glasgow.⁸⁹ A large number of dissenters would have preferred Mr Archibald Cook Sutherland.⁹⁰ Shanks was unhappy with the definition of his colleague's duties. He had agreed to "give up the practical management of the congregation", but he did not accept that this should mean his surrendering control of the pulpit and the chairmanship of the Session and Deacons' Court. Rev J. W. Geddie, Banff, criticised the minister for obstructive behaviour during the proceedings. The week after the edict was served, he apparently "entered the pulpit and declaimed against the Presbytery, charging them with overbearing conduct and depriving him of his rights as a Presbyterian minister". Geddie implied that Shanks encouraged the opposition which was so extensive that the Synod had to send a deputation to Buckie to calm the disquiet before the induction proceeded.⁹¹

In 1875 Shanks wrote a pamphlet against instrumental music in response to the Duke of Richmond's gift of an organ to the Established Church at Enzie. Shanks called the organ "a gift of questionable legitimacy" and traced the growing corruption in the medieval church which first led to the use of instruments in worship. He argued, "The organ you have inadvertently presented sprang from the imagination of man in the Dark Ages, is not an institution of God . . . and is part of human ritualism which his Majesty's Government last year denounced and largely curtailed by their own authority [in the Church of England]".⁹²

In 1878, the Shanks family left Buckie for Aberdeen. The *Banffshire Journal* commented, "The inhabitants miss his kindly greeting when meeting him on his many travels through our streets".⁹³ Initially Shanks lived at 62 Bon Accord Street.⁹⁴ The family appears to have been

⁸⁹ Miller was born in Thurso in 1843 and studied at Aberdeen University; see Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 267.

⁹⁰ Sutherland was born at Lybster, Caithness and ordained to Dalguise and Strathbraan in 1870. He moved to Australia in 1885; see Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland*, Vol. 1, p. 335.

⁹¹ *Banffshire Journal*, 2nd February 1875.

⁹² Robert Shanks, *The Organ in the Church of Scotland*, p. 12.

⁹³ *Banffshire Journal*, 3rd June 1878.

⁹⁴ The 1881 census for Aberdeen records that Jessie and John were still at home, along with Agnes Farquhar, 21, a servant. John was at that time a clerk with the Midland Railway in Aberdeen.

worshipping at the Free High Church in Belmont Street because the minister, Rev Henry W. Bell, assisted Shanks at the wedding of his daughter Margaret in 1879.⁹⁵ Later Shanks moved to Gladstone Place and lastly to 24 Gordondale Road, where he died on 17th April 1884.⁹⁶ His passing was unexpected as he was in robust health and had been elected a member of the forthcoming Assembly by the Presbytery of Fordyce. Mrs. Shanks died at 56 Fountainhall Road, Aberdeen on 15th August 1889 aged 62.⁹⁷

6. Conclusion

Robert Shanks was an unusual man and he had an unusual life. He was larger-than-life – large in physique and large in personality. His determination and his strong religious convictions led him into frequent controversy and made him many enemies. However, his kindness, generosity, and love and care for his flock and adopted town made him many devoted followers and friends.

He was associated with more riots and tumults than is usual with ministers of the gospel but it does not appear that he was entirely to blame for this. The testimony of the Roman Catholic physician Donald Carmichael, when prevented from speaking at one of these disorderly occasions, that Shanks' "conduct was always gentlemanly and polite . . . and I cannot entertain towards him any other sentiments than those of friendship and respect", strongly suggests that Shanks was not the cause of the trouble.

Shanks' attitude to the 1859 Revival is interesting. He was happy to countenance the somewhat irregular work of evangelism and public-speaking by laymen, but he was resolutely opposed to the excesses, and he would not allow the excitement to undermine the divinely instituted order in the Church. He shows the caution with which the subject of the 1859 Revival must be approached.

His resignation from his charge in 1858, and subsequent restoration to it in 1859, was not entirely to his credit. If his manual

⁹⁵ *Aberdeen Free Press*, 2nd August 1879.

⁹⁶ *Aberdeen Directory*, 1878-89.

⁹⁷ The Shanks were buried in Allendale Cemetery on the right of the main path, a few yards from the side gate on Great Southern Road. Their headstone is of Peterhead granite. A little further on, at the junction of the paths, is Principal Lumsden's grave, marked by a table stone. Lumsden was Principal of the Aberdeen Free Church College from 1864 to his death in 1875.

labour had affected the quality of his preaching then he was certainly too much engaged in it; and his failure to keep adequate Session and Deacons' Court records cannot be condoned, though it is difficult for a minister if he is unable to devolve this work on a suitable helper. In any case, these are hardly sufficient grounds for dismissing a minister from his charge. Shanks' final exoneration by the Commission, and the departure of his enemies to the United Presbyterian Church, seems to indicate that the faults, whatever they were, were largely on their side.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Shanks' ministry – something that he shared with James Begg – was the combination of strong Protestantism, practical involvement with the poor in their social problems, and ecclesiastical conservatism in matters such as psalmody and musical instruments. The *Aberdeen Free Press* commented, "His sympathies lay wholly with the non-progressive anti-innovation party in the Free Church".⁹⁸ He did not think that psalms and unaccompanied singing were obstacles in the way of bringing humble fishermen to Christ, and, like Begg, he had more experience in these matters than many who were pushing for such innovations. As his letter to the Duke of Richmond showed, the introduction of musical instruments in the North East had more to do with making the Free Church genteel than it did with evangelism.

Shanks was of modest social origins, apparently, but he was intelligent and highly educated and had somehow become very wealthy. Nevertheless he chose to devote his life to a people who, when he came to them, were "two hundred years in arrear of Scottish civilisation". His ministry, though controversial, was fruitful, and he is remembered in Buckie to this day. He deserves to be remembered more widely still.

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⁹⁸ *Aberdeen Free Press*, 18th April 1884.

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