
The 'New College': the birth of a theological institution, 1843-1850

ROBIN GRAY

1. Introduction: a New Kirk, a New College

When the Disruption in the Church of Scotland took place on 18th May 1843, scores of divinity students adhering to the Free Church left their studies at the country's five universities, all of which remained connected to the Establishment. This left the new denomination with only a few months to finance, organise, and staff a 'new college' for the training of its ministers in time for the next academic session, which began in November. This considerable challenge was not considered daunting by the Free Church of Scotland. Rather, it was viewed as an opportunity to establish an institution which reflected the educational aspirations and theological principles of its founders.

From the General Assembly in May 1843, when the founding of New College was first discussed, such an institution was not viewed in isolation. A nationwide scheme of Christian education under the auspices of the Free Church, from elementary schools to universities, was held in contemplation. One incentive for such a scheme was the fact that religious tests requiring adherence to the Establishment were being used to dismiss school teachers who had joined the Free Church, and the threat of them being used against university professors had already surfaced. Against this tumultuous backdrop, the major question for the Free Church was one of vision: what should the New College aim to be? This dissertation will seek to trace the developing vision for New College in its formative years, from the Disruption in May 1843 to the opening of its permanent building on the Mound in Edinburgh in November 1850.¹

It is our thesis that the birth and early development of New College is best understood when we recognise that all of its founders identified themselves as heirs of the Scottish Reformation and saw the Disruption as a way of realising the ideals of their Reforming forbears. New College was to play an important role in this 'Third Reformation': Protestant orthodoxy would be both promoted and protected by an institution uniquely equipped to repel contemporary threats from within and without. All the founding fathers

¹ This article was originally a dissertation submitted for the degree of Bachelor of Theology in May 2018 at the Edinburgh Theological Seminary.

of New College shared a three-pronged objective in the reform of theological education in Scotland, the present state of which they considered to be severely wanting. These were: to introduce more rigorous preparatory studies; to end the traditional system of having all year-groups in one class; and to introduce the sustained exegetical study of the Bible in its original languages.

However, there was a difference in viewpoint among the founders of New College over its educational scope. A frequently asked question, both in the Church courts and in print, was whether the institution should limit itself to training ministers or should seek to become something more akin to a fully-fledged university; and not everyone was of the same opinion.² This continued to be an active question even when the New College building was being designed and constructed – with provision made to expand the edifice if necessary. *Which* of the Free Church fathers wanted *what* in this regard is something that we hope to clarify.

(1) *Principal Figures and Primary Sources*

Three men loom large in the shaping of the vision of New College: David Welsh, Thomas Chalmers, and William Cunningham. The latter two were highly influential figures in the Free Church as a whole and were the first two Principals of New College. The former, David Welsh, is the often overlooked but visionary progenitor of the entire Free Church educational project. Welsh was instrumental in setting up the fledgling College whilst the other two men were otherwise engaged, instilling founding principles that endured long after his death only two years after the Disruption. The main sources for interpreting Welsh's vision for New College are the Free Church Education Committee Reports drawn up under his Convenorship and presented by him to the General Assemblies in 1843 (both May and October) and 1844.

As its first Principal, Chalmers casts a long shadow over New College. He gave opening addresses at the beginning of each academic session from 1843 to 1846 (before his own death in 1847), which he used in great measure to articulate the principles and priorities of the new institution over which he presided. These, together with his speech at the laying of the building's foundation stone on the Mound in 1846, afford considerable insight into the development of Chalmers' thought about New College. In addition, a private memorandum from Chalmers to the Free Church's Education Committee, republished in Hugh Watt's *New College: A Centenary History*, helps us to see important distinctions between Welsh's and Chalmers' thinking on the scope of higher education in the early days of the Free Church.

Finally, William Cunningham, New College's second Principal, had been integral to the development of New College since his appointment as a Junior Professor in 1843. In his essay 'The Disruption and the Dream', historian Stewart J. Brown portrays Cunningham's educational principles and theological convictions as at significant variance with those of Chalmers and Welsh, leading to a notable and negative shift in the New College vision during his Principalship. In particular, Brown asserts that Chalmers wanted New

² Donald J. Withrington, 'The Free Church Educational Scheme, 1843-50', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society (RSCHS)*, Vol. 15.2 (1965), p. 105.

College to be a ‘free Christian university’ – a plan that Cunningham effectively shut down after Chalmers’ death.³ In this dissertation we will seek to engage with a number of the assertions made by Brown regarding Chalmers and Cunningham in this respect. We conclude that statements made by Chalmers and Cunningham in New College’s early years not only tell a story of greater continuity and sympathy between their visions than Brown suggests, but they also call into question whether Chalmers was as committed to making New College a ‘free Christian university’ as Brown claims.

Cunningham travelled to America in 1843 and visited three colleges there, most notably Princeton Theological Seminary, and these experiences undoubtedly helped to shape his views on theological education. Principal Cunningham’s inaugural address at the opening of the New College building on the Mound in 1850 affords significant insight into his distinctive vision for the institution. Rainy and Mackenzie’s *Life of Cunningham* preserves much material from his American trip and the days of his professorship.

(2) *Secondary Sources*

Three notable works include coverage of New College’s early life, all written by historians at the institution itself: Hugh Watt’s *New College: A Centenary History* from 1946; A.C. Cheyne’s ‘New College, Edinburgh: 1846-1996’ in his *Essays in Church History*; and Stewart J. Brown’s aforementioned essay, ‘The Disruption and the Dream: The Making of New College, 1843-1861’. Watt’s work is particularly useful in that it reprints primary documents relating to New College’s inception. Michael W. Honeycutt’s 2002 Edinburgh PhD thesis ‘William Cunningham: his life, thought, and controversies’ offers much helpful material relating to Cunningham’s time as Professor and Principal.

2. Foundations: David Welsh and the first days of New College

The establishment of New College was not initially the work of Thomas Chalmers, as is perhaps widely believed. In the months immediately prior to and subsequent to the Disruption, Chalmers was deeply engaged in the work of ‘Sustentation’ – the vast and complex task of raising money for ministers and congregations leaving the Establishment. Although he was widely tipped to be chosen as the Principal of the new institution, not least due to his having occupied the Chair of Divinity at Edinburgh University, Chalmers’ immediate concerns with Church finance and organisation prevented his greater involvement in the establishment of a College for the training of ministers prior to the beginning of the academic session in November 1843.⁴

Rather, the birth of New College was largely the project of Dr David Welsh (1793-1845). It was Welsh who was elected Convener of the Education

³ Stewart J. Brown, ‘The Disruption and the Dream: The Making of New College, 1843-1861’, in David F. Wright and Gary D. Badcock (eds.), *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity, 1846-1996* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 36.

⁴ William Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers, D.D., LL.D.* (4 vols, Edinburgh: Thomas Constable and Co., 1849-1852), Vol. 4, p. 423.

Committee of the first Free Church General Assembly, and so was charged with drafting a Report which would lay out the Church's entire educational vision. Included within this very broad remit was the training of the Church's ministers. It was Welsh who thus produced the Education Committee's successive reports which called for a 'New College' in Edinburgh, which were approved by the May and October General Assemblies in 1843. It was also Welsh who personally raised much of the finance for the College and who assembled the basis of its impressive Library. Further, when the iconic building on the Mound that became New College's home in 1850 was opened, the then Principal William Cunningham said, 'To Dr. Welsh we are chiefly indebted, under God, for the erection of this building.'⁵ Perhaps even more importantly it was David Welsh, not Chalmers, who first publicly argued for the foundation of new *universities*, not merely theological colleges, as part of the Free Church's long-term educational objectives.⁶ It was this early assertion by Welsh that triggered ongoing discussion on whether New College might become something more than a theological institution.

Welsh had been Chalmers' colleague in the Divinity Faculty at Edinburgh University and had demitted his Chair in Church History along with Chalmers following the Disruption, in June 1843. He had held his Professorship since 1831 and it was a position in which he had thrived. He had not enjoyed pastoral ministry, either in the country or city charges in which he had laboured previously. His close friend and biographer, the advocate Alexander Dunlop, said that 'the character and whole tone of his mind was academic', and that on his taking the Chair in Church History at Edinburgh 'it was at once seen he was in his proper place'.⁷ Welsh had also studied at Edinburgh University and in 1825 had published a biography of his mentor of student days, the philosopher and poet Thomas Brown.⁸

Yet Welsh, the bookish academic, had to overcome his natural distaste for public debate at the rise of the Ten Years' Conflict in the Church of Scotland. His strong anti-Patronage convictions lead Welsh, a man for whom even speaking at the Assembly was 'distasteful' and 'repugnant', to make a number of forceful and impassioned speeches during that period.⁹ Welsh was finally thrust into the very centre of the tumult when he was elected Moderator of the 1842 General Assembly. As Retiring Moderator in 1843 it thus fell to Welsh to read aloud the Declaration and Protest and then lead the solemn procession of ministers out of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to the Tanfield Hall on 18th May. For a man so disinclined towards the spotlight, it was an episode which seems to have

⁵ William Cunningham (ed.), *Inauguration of the New College of the Free Church, Edinburgh: With Introductory Lectures on Theology, Philosophy, and Natural Science* (London & Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1851), p. 44.

⁶ *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland Held at Edinburgh, May 1843* (Edinburgh: John Greig & Son, 1853), p. 125. Henceforth PGAFCS.

⁷ David Welsh and A. Dunlop, *Sermons by the Late Reverend David Welsh, D.D., With a Memoir by A. Dunlop* (Edinburgh: W.P. Kennedy, 1846), p. 51.

⁸ David Welsh, *Account of the Life and Writings of Thomas Brown, M.D.: Late Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: W. & C. Tait, 1825), p. iv.

⁹ Dunlop, *Memoir of David Welsh*, p. 63.

traumatised him at a time when he was already experiencing failing health due to a heart condition.¹⁰

(1) *The May Assembly*

Prior to the Disruption, there appears to have been little to no discussion about the provision of theological training among those preparing to leave.¹¹ Therefore the first official document from which the vision for New College emerges is the Free Church Education Committee's Report, delivered by its Convenor and principal author David Welsh at the General Assembly on Thursday 25th May 1843.

Welsh divided his proposals into that which was '*essential*, and must be done *instantly*' and what was '*desirable*, and for which preparations should be made *without delay*'.¹² Falling into the first category was, of course, the most pressing: it was the end of May, and the Church needed to have a functioning theological college by November. 'It is essential that provision should at once be made for carrying on the education of students of divinity who given their adherence to this Church, and of students who propose to engage in the study of divinity next winter.'¹³ Welsh said that whilst at least three theological colleges should be founded, the Church would have to bear for one year with the provision of only one. Again for one year only, the course of study would be the same as that followed in the universities. The essential requirements were for the appointment of three or four Professors, the foundation of a library, and the acquisition of a hall or classroom.¹⁴

Beyond these bare necessities covering the 1843-4 academic session, however, Welsh was thinking big. In fact, he was seeking nothing less than to realise the educational vision of the *First Book of Discipline*, a foundational document of the Scottish Reformation in 1560. Tasked as they were with addressing education at all levels, not just a college for the training of ministers, Welsh and the majority of the committee took the most expansive view of education possible, making direct reference to the *First Book of Discipline* in asserting: 'there ought to be one school connected to every church, grammar schools in all of our towns and three universities'. Welsh said 'the whole system of education should be under an effective religious control', whilst such a scheme would bring about 'the perfection of the presbyterian system', and would be animated by a spirit of 'devoted piety'.¹⁵ The Disruption was a means of realising the Reformation and this would be effected, in part, through a system of national Christian education. Whilst in the first instance the new college would be delivering on the immediate demands of the coming academic session, Welsh clearly saw it at the centre of what was 'desirable' and to be brought about 'without delay' as well – the founding of new universities.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

¹¹ Hugh Watt, *New College, Edinburgh: A Centenary History* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1946), p. 9.

¹² *PGAFCs, May 1843*, p. 123.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

With regards to training ministers, Welsh shared Chalmers' long-held views that the existing system of theological education in the Scottish universities was inadequate, and a new college brought the opportunity to provide something far superior. In the traditional system, there were typically only three Professors: of Divinity, Church History, and Hebrew.¹⁶ No systematic exegetical study of the Bible in the original languages took place.¹⁷ Further, the Divinity and Church History curricula were taught over a four-year cycle to the entire student body. This long-criticised format meant that only one year-group in four joined these courses at the beginning and followed them in the preferred order.¹⁸ Welsh commended a reformed and extended course of theological study, with a larger Faculty to deliver it. This would not take further shape until there was time to develop a more detailed plan, but the broad Faculty and wide curriculum that would go on to be realised by the time of the New College building's inauguration in 1850 was clearly present in Welsh's Report in 1843.

In terms of the scope of education, Welsh acknowledged that not everyone on the Education Committee shared his broad view. Some wondered if the Church could possibly meet the cost of supplying new universities or whether such a scheme was even necessary. On the first point, Welsh felt that money was no object: 'the difficulty of raising funds should not for a moment interfere with our plans,' he said, adding: 'there is no reason to doubt that the people of Scotland will enable the Church to carry her plans into execution.'¹⁹ As to the question of whether such a scheme was in fact necessary, his reply was that 'having given a shock to the existing religious and educational establishments by withdrawing from them, we are bound to furnish Scotland with an equivalent.'²⁰

Welsh's vision won the day. Tapping into the ebullient and ambitious atmosphere of the Disruption Assembly, Welsh's speech was punctuated by applause, cheers, and even laughter as he expressed total confidence in the astronomical financial requirements for the educational vision being met, quipping at one point that the luminaries of the Free Church could furnish the required theological library out of their own written works.²¹ As Withrington notes: 'The conclusions of this majority in the committee were enthusiastically acclaimed by the Assembly, whose members seem to have regarded themselves as the leaders of a new reformation.'²²

The Report, recommending an extensive system of national education at all levels, was approved by the Assembly.²³ However, the Act that was passed in response on the 29th of May made reference only to the 'immediate concerns' of Welsh's Report, not the longer-term ambitions it had also urged

¹⁶ Hanna, *Memoirs of Thomas Chalmers*, Vol. 4, p. 417.

¹⁷ Michael Wade Honeycutt, 'William Cunningham: his life, thought, and controversies' (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2002), p. 238.

¹⁸ Watt, *New College, Edinburgh*, p. 11.

¹⁹ *PGAFCS, May 1843*, p. 125.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²² Withrington, 'The Free Church Educational Scheme, 1843-50', p. 106.

²³ *PGAFCS, May 1843*, p. 128.

on the Church. The Committee was only empowered to plan for *one* college and to appoint four Divinity Professors to staff it.²⁴

(2) *The October Assembly*

On the eve of New College opening its doors, the Free Church met for its second General Assembly of 1843, this time in Glasgow. Welsh reported that all the objectives laid out for the immediate needs of the College had been met. In an arduous fundraising tour which further tested his poor health, he had raised nearly £20,000 (a massive sum) for New College in the space of two months through appealing to wealthy supporters of the Free Church to make large individual endowments. A building in George Street was acquired and Welsh had personally coordinated the acquisition of 3,000 books to form the basis of the library. The Moderator, Dr Thomas Brown, said to Welsh: 'We rejoice in the success which has attended your labours in this department of duty – a success beyond our most sanguine expectations in the present infant state of our Church.'²⁵

Again, Welsh's identification with the Reformation was evident. Announcing the official appointment of Thomas Chalmers as Principal and Primarius Professor of Divinity at New College, Welsh said: 'as John Knox took the lead in the first Reformation, Alexander Henderson in the second, Thomas Chalmers stands forth as representative in the third Reformation.'²⁶ Welsh himself had taken the Chair in Church History. John Duncan, the man dubbed 'Rabbi' by his friends due to his 'unrivalled attainments in Hebrew and Oriental Literature', was engaged as Professor of Hebrew. Finally, 'the general voice of the Church and the country indicated Dr. Cunningham for a fourth Chair.'²⁷ Further, Cunningham was to 'proceed to the United States, partly with the view of pleading our Church question, and partly that he might have the opportunity of witnessing the manner in which education, and particularly theological education, is conducted in the seminaries of the New World'.²⁸ Cunningham's insights from that expedition would inform the developing vision of New College in due course.

With regard to a revised curriculum, Welsh said: 'many important changes are in contemplation, but it is judged of consequence to proceed with them wisely and introduce no change without due consideration'. However, the priority in terms of change was the introduction of 'preliminary classes, by which students may be fully prepared for the Theological curriculum'. He said that it was the Committee's 'anxious wish to elevate the standard of literary and philosophical attainments, and to secure for the Free Church young men thoroughly educated.' However, this Reformation emphasis on an educated ministry was being re-envisaged in a nineteenth-century context to embrace subjects of particular contemporary interest: 'the Committee

²⁴ *Acts of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, Convened at Edinburgh, May 1843, with the Proceedings of that Assembly* (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland, 1843), p. 37.

²⁵ *PGAFCs, October 1843*, p. 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

also contemplate great changes in regard to natural philosophy and moral philosophy, but are not sufficiently matured to admit of being stated.' Clearly, the vision for New College was far from ultimately decided or set. Chalmers' address at the opening of the New College's first session would flesh out some of the thinking hinted at in Welsh's October report.

(3) *The first session begins*

In line with Welsh's plan, the 1843-4 curriculum would not go much beyond what the universities provided – a three-Professor system. Yet even as the term commenced, sights were being set on expansion at the earliest opportunity. Thomas Chalmers' address at the opening of the first academic session on 1st November 1843 makes this abundantly clear. The focus of Chalmers' speech, and of much his thinking on the subject at this time, was on the importance of preliminary studies to improve the standard of incoming students. He clearly saw a place for the study of a wide range of subjects, at a stage above school level, which should be undertaken before embarking on 'professional study'. This may seem at first glance to be simply a 'Queen of the Sciences' model, where the study of theology came after extensive and rigorous training in more rudimentary subjects. But his address suggests that preparation for any advanced profession – that of lawyer, economist or naturalist – would benefit from such preliminary study.

Chalmers had wondered where such preparatory education might take place. He was considering the possibility of provincial *gymnasia* – intermediate educational institutions in Scotland's larger towns and cities, based on the German model – to provide such training, and he would later endorse a plan submitted to the Free Church recommending such a system.²⁹ Certainly he felt that the first years of study for candidates for the ministry should have a preparatory tenor, as he sought to lay out

those changes which ought to be made on our academic system, in order that the literature and philosophy of the antecedent schools might best pave the way for those lessons of heavenly and divine knowledge which are usually given forth by the masters of the Theological Faculty.³⁰

The first stage of such proposed preparation comprised the study of three subjects: Greek, Mathematics, and Logic. Chalmers considered these as much necessary for the learning *methods* with which they equipped the student, as for the *content* of the subjects themselves: they provided 'a course of gymnastics of the mind'. Thus equipped with skill in language and 'right reasoning', students would proceed to the next stage with two more preliminary courses, covering the 'phenomena and laws of the material, and the phenomena and laws of the moral world.' It was in emphasising the importance of both Natural and Moral Philosophy in theological education that Chalmers said New College would lead the way:

²⁹ See Alexander Anderson, *Gymnasia, or, Intermediate Institutions: Being a Statement Submitted to the College Committee of the Free Church* (Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1846).

³⁰ Thomas Chalmers, 'Principal's Address at the Opening of the Free Church College, November 1843', in William Hanna (ed.), *Posthumous Works of the Rev. Thomas Chalmers, D.D., LL.D.* (9 vols., Edinburgh: Thomas Constable and Co., 1847-1849), Vol. 9, p. 436.

It is here that we feel most induced to innovate on the existing methods of academical education, and it is now, therefore, that we would prefer the most earnest demand on the attention of those who hear us.³¹

Reflecting his own theological method, Chalmers insisted on an order of inquiry which began with nature: 'we prefer the antecedency given by Aristotle to the physical over the mental sciences; and we should alternate the present order, making the natural philosophy come first.'³²

Only after attainment in these five subjects had been achieved would the way finally be paved for the study of Theology itself. But even here, Chalmers argued that the curriculum should be augmented to include a Professorship which brought all the fields of science together into a manner specifically suited for the preparation of theology students: 'a Professorship of the Physical Sciences in their connexion with Theology'.³³ Such instruction could not be exhaustive because 'in the march of discovery, these lessons have now accumulated a hundredfold, and it would require the best years of a man's life to attain the mastery over them'. The course would therefore satisfy itself with insights that were 'relative and rudimental to theology, so as to both strengthen the basis and elevate the superstructure of that science [i.e. Theology]'.³⁴

As New College added to its staff in the years ahead in line with Chalmers' proposal, this address reveals in what respect their subjects were primarily viewed: as part of the theological curriculum. Without sufficient recourse to the explanations made for them such as those given above, these professorial appointments have been misread by some historians as the establishment of a quite separate 'Arts' faculty and curriculum, and thus the first stage in making New College a university. For example, Withrington states: 'once a tutor in classics and a professor of moral philosophy were appointed, followed by professors of natural science and logic, the first steps towards constructing a complete university were readily visible.'³⁵ However, as we have seen, all of these appointments were in the subjects identified by Chalmers in his 1843 address as 'antecedent' or 'cognate' to the study of Theology and part of the preliminary section of that curriculum.

In his opening address we see Chalmers placing a great deal of emphasis on intellectual ability, even prowess, in a wide array of challenging fields as necessary for entrance into theological training. Was this simply a reassertion of the Reformation principle of a 'learned ministry', clearly established under the Fifth Head of the *First Book of Discipline*? Or were conditions being created that would set the bar so high as to exclude all but the most keenly intellectual candidates? Further, might the increased emphasis on natural philosophy and science expose the curriculum to more of the Spirit of the Age than its founders might have realised? However one might seek to trace

³¹ Ibid., p. 440.

³² Ibid., p. 440.

³³ Ibid., p. 442.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 444.

³⁵ Donald J. Withrington, 'Adrift among the Reefs of Conflicting Ideals? Education and the Free Church, 1843-55', in Stewart J. Brown and Michael Fry (eds.), *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption* (Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 88.

these influences downstream to the controversies of the next generation, for our purposes we can see a clear vision emerging for New College: extensive preliminary studies should be introduced, whilst attention to discoveries in the natural sciences would be given alongside the theological curriculum.

(4) The 1844 Assembly: looking back and forward

As the first academic session at New College drew to a close, the Free Church gathered for its May Assembly on the first anniversary of the Disruption. Even in having addressed only what was 'essential' and to be done 'instantly', one could hardly describe New College, as Stewart J. Brown does, as 'a modest Theological Hall' in the session of 1843-4.³⁶ Such a term would have been used for the small-scale facilities of the Secession and Cameronian denominations. New College, however, had a roll of more than 200 students and had poached two of Edinburgh University's three Divinity Professors.³⁷ Ninety-three divinity students from Edinburgh University alone had left and joined the Free Church.³⁸ It was clearly a direct rival to the University Faculty, and thus the training facilities of the Establishment, and had already set out its stall to go beyond this. As the influential Free Church elder and Education Committee member Alexander Earle Monteith (the Sheriff of Fife) would boast in the Assembly: 'where are the rest of those eminent men who formerly shed a lustre on the University? They are amongst us!'³⁹

In Welsh's Report, he was able to declare the last session 'a wonderful success'. However, New College did not yet have a constitution and therefore had not been officially 'founded'. Thus, the ultimate vision for the institution was still not clear. Welsh contended that the continued threat of religious tests 'renders it an imperative duty to found a College, where the theological students, and, if it should prove necessary, where members of the Free Church, and all others who are so inclined, may be instructed in every branch of a liberal education.' This broader remit had not won universal support, however. Welsh continued: '[t]he Committee had fondly hoped that they might be enabled to report a commencement of such an institution. They have been disappointed in the mean time.'⁴⁰ Whilst such a foundation was not secured, Welsh asked that additional appointments might be made to the Faculty of New College so as to augment the curriculum in line with the recommendations of Chalmers' opening address, and this was agreed to. The issue of a constitution, however, would not be resolved for several years.

(5) Earle Monteith's Speech

Alexander Earle Monteith, following on from Welsh's speech, was also enthusiastic about the prospect of founding of a fully-fledged university, but only in the event of the Establishment hounding out Free Churchmen from the existing ones: 'for that will be the moment when we will acquire full

³⁶ Brown, 'The Disruption and the Dream', p. 35.

³⁷ *PGAFCS, May 1844*, p. 231. Welsh reported the total number of students in the 1843-4 session as 212.

³⁸ Watt, *New College, Edinburgh*, p. 8.

³⁹ *PGAFCS, May 1844*, p. 234.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

and renewed energy, and go forward with the plan to which I have alluded, and embracing not theology alone, but all the sciences, and affording to our own people, and to all others, a complete and ample education, conducted on evangelical principles.⁴¹

Monteith's statement sheds important light on just how much of a factor the imposition – or otherwise – of the Test Act was in the debate over New College's future. Many were in favour of the Church's founding a new university, but only if she was forced to do so because of the expulsion of Free Church professors from the established universities. At this time the scientist Sir David Brewster, Principal of United College at the University of St Andrews, was facing legal action from the Established Presbytery of St Andrews, which was attempting to depose him from his post on the basis of his adherence to the Free Church.⁴² But as yet, no wholesale imposition of tests had taken place in the universities. Indeed, a number of senior academics, including Dr Robert Brown, Professor of Greek at Marischal College in Aberdeen (who would go on to be Moderator of the Free Church General Assembly in 1846), had *kept* their university Chairs despite adherence to the Free Church.⁴³ A significant proportion of Free Church ministers and elders seemed reluctant to commit to such a huge enterprise as Welsh was suggesting unless they were forced into doing so by the punitive actions of the Establishment.

(6) *North and South*

Already in 1844, another issue was coming to the fore which would distract from the prospect of establishing an institution offering 'every branch of a liberal education' in Edinburgh: pressure from other burghs, most vocally Aberdeen, for theological colleges of their own. Rather than comprehensiveness in one town, others wanted basic ministerial training in several. Those arguing for 'extension', as it was called, claimed that the absence of any Free Church training institution in the burgh of Aberdeen, in which there were two universities with Divinity Faculties connected to the Establishment, threatened to undermine the denomination's cause in the North East.⁴⁴

The only other Professor apart from Chalmers and Welsh to demit his Divinity Chair at a Scottish university in the Disruption was the accomplished linguist and exegete Dr Alexander Black of Marischal College, Aberdeen. His 'coming out' in June 1843 had prompted immediate questions about the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁴² Anon., 'Scottish Clerical and University Tests', *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 81, no. 164 (April 1845), pp. 249, 259.

⁴³ Hew Scott (ed.), *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ; the Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation* (2nd edn., 7 vols., Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1915-1928), Vol. 6, p. 307; R. G. Philip, 'Notes on the Early Moderators of the Free Church (1843-1850)', *RSCHS*, Vol. 8.2 (1944) p. 168. As Philip notes, Ewing's *Annals* incorrectly states that Brown lost his Chair due to his adherence to the Free Church. In fact, he retained it until the union of Marischal and King's Colleges into the University of Aberdeen in 1860.

⁴⁴ For a portrait of the thrusting and competitive nature of the Free Church in Aberdeen, see Allan MacLaren, *Religion and Social Class: The Disruption Years in Aberdeen* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974). For a recent account of the Aberdeen College, see Clare Davidson, *College Voices: the story of Christ's College, Aberdeen* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2018).

possibility of founding a college in that town, and the Church's recognition of Black's 'vast learning' and 'mastery of languages' lead to him being appointed 'sole Professor at Aberdeen', tutoring Free Church students in rooms in the town's Silver Street in the 1843-4 session. However, in 1844 he was appointed to the Faculty at New College, taking up a new Chair in Exegetical Theology.⁴⁵ Whilst this only raised further questions about the provision of education in Aberdeen in Black's absence, New College was clearly wasting no time in addressing another one of its aims – to introduce systematic exegetical study of the Bible in the original languages, something which had been largely missing from the Scottish theological curriculum for at least a century.

(7) *The Legacy of Welsh*

In recognition of the growth of the New College project – which now included the design and construction of a building 'upon a scale of such magnitude, and such architectural effect, as may be suited to so vast an object' on Edinburgh's 'Earthen Mound' – a special committee was now devoted to it, with Welsh again as the Convener. He was also appointed Principal Librarian of New College.⁴⁶ Earlier in the year Welsh had become the founding editor of *The North British Review* and had also published the first volume of his *Elements of Church History*, covering the first 300 years of the Church, which was projected to 'extend to six or seven volumes'.⁴⁷

However, such a strain on Welsh's health and energies finally took its toll. As one owner of Welsh's *Elements of Church History*, the American Presbyterian historian Samuel Agnew, would write in the fly-leaf: 'Volume I is all that has been published, death called its noble author to higher duties ere this had well begun.'⁴⁸ Ill health laid Welsh aside from his teaching duties early in the 1844-5 session, and he died in April 1845. Although less than two years had passed since the work on New College had commenced, he had left an indelible mark on its educational vision. Most notably, Welsh had ambitious and expansive ideas as to its scope: it should be an institution as comprehensive and prolific as the 'Third Reformation' of which it was a part. Further, Welsh, the accomplished man of letters whom William Cunningham would describe as 'a thoroughly academic man in his whole character, tastes, habits and deportment', had helped to create an institution with a formidably intellectual emphasis.⁴⁹

3. Thomas Chalmers' vision for New College

In his essay 'The Disruption and the Dream', Stewart J. Brown states that from 1845, the year of David Welsh's death, Thomas Chalmers began actively

⁴⁵ 'Dr. Alexander Black', Obituary, *The Record of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1st March 1864, p. 473.

⁴⁶ PGAFCS, *May 1844*, pp. 231-2, 234-5.

⁴⁷ 'Preface' in David Welsh, *Elements of Church History: Comprising the External History of the Church during the First Three Centuries* (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1844).

⁴⁸ In the copy donated by Agnew to the library of Princeton Theological Seminary and digitised on archive.org, this is inscribed in the flyleaf, and can be inspected at the following address: <http://archive.org/details/elementsofchurch00wels>

⁴⁹ William Cunningham, 'Review of *Elements of Church History, Vol. I* by David Welsh D.D., F.R.S.E', *The North British Review*, Vol. 3, no. 6 (August 1845), p. 445.

to propound the vision for New College to be a ‘free Christian university’. Brown writes:

Many perceived New College as the beginning of a great free Christian university, destined not only to prepare a learned Free Church ministry, but to advance Christian scholarship across a range of disciplines and to educate leaders in politics and the professions...One who embraced this vision was Thomas Chalmers.⁵⁰

This was certainly the type of institution envisaged by *Welsh* – although by ‘free’ *Welsh* meant a university free *from the Establishment* yet under ‘an effective religious control’. As we have seen, this was also the view espoused by A. Earle Monteith, but only in the event of tests being widely used to exclude Free Church professors and students from the universities. Further it was, in part, the view embraced by Robert Candlish, one of the most influential leaders in the Free Church.⁵¹ But was this something Chalmers himself had actually promoted, and would have succeeded in bringing about had he lived beyond 1847, as Brown claims? Tellingly, none of Chalmers’ four opening addresses at New College significantly set forth such a vision; neither does his speech at the laying of the foundation stone on the Mound in 1846. Instead, they offer a remarkably precise insight into what Chalmers’ vision for New College actually was: an institution aimed *primarily*, if not solely, at the creation of a ‘learned ministry’. Graduates would be so trained as to meet the specific challenges of the age: heresy and ‘infidelity’ – scholarship which questioned the Bible’s inspiration and reliability. In continuity with *Welsh*, these addresses contain explicit appeals to the Reformation and identify the Free Church as the heirs of the Reformers. As with Chalmers’ first opening address in 1843, his emphasis remained on *preparatory* education and a renovated theological curriculum, something which was well on its way to being realised at the time of his death. As for a ‘Christian university’ – there are, at best, only very occasional hints at such idea, and these do not form the main burden of any of the addresses.

(1) A Revealing Memorandum

Before we take a closer look at these addresses, it is well worth taking note of a remarkable document found within Chalmers’ papers and reprinted in Hugh Watt’s *New College: A Centenary History*.⁵² The paper, marked ‘Confidential’, is attributed to Chalmers, with Watt commenting that it ‘evidently belongs to 1843’, although we can be less sure of this, especially as Chalmers already refers to challenges from other towns as to a central seat of learning in Edinburgh. The document reveals Chalmers’ own thought-process in laying out the pros and cons of the Free Church’s founding a university as opposed to a theological college in Edinburgh. Many of the conclusions he arrives at

⁵⁰ Brown, ‘The Disruption and the Dream’, p. 36.

⁵¹ Sometimes portrayed as merely advocating ‘extension’ in the sense of having theological colleges in Aberdeen and Glasgow, Candlish actually desired *four* ‘full colleges’ in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and St. Andrews. See R.S. Candlish, *College Extension* (Edinburgh, 1849).

⁵² Watt, *New College, Edinburgh*, p. 26.

here find their way into the public statements Chalmers made about New College in later years.

Firstly, Chalmers very early on discounts the idea of 'an entire University' because there are no means of establishing faculties such as those of Law or Medicine.⁵³ Having made this move, Chalmers then asks the question of whether this 'College' (no longer a 'University') should 'embrace a Faculty of *Arts* as well as *Theology*?⁵⁴ A major negative Chalmers gives in this regard is the likely opposition of the existing State institutions and the general public. He then concludes that even this combined Arts-Theology College could succeed only if several conditions could be met, such as a system of teaching superior to that available elsewhere 'including [the] religious element'; of being able to recruit 'Professors of *first rate eminence*'; as well as there being an increased public dissatisfaction with the standard of education offered at the State institutions.⁵⁵ Chalmers notes the huge risk of starting a Faculty of Arts 'without the requisites for a decided pre-eminence' and tentatively suggests that it would be 'expedient to limit the College to a Theological Faculty, in the first instance, but prepared to develop as circumstances may occur.'⁵⁶

He then sketches out the plan for preliminary and supplementary education in the theological curriculum that he would publicly espouse in his opening addresses.⁵⁷ Of the many insights that one gains from study of this document, one is that Chalmers was more pragmatic than idealistic about the extension of education beyond theology at New College. He certainly saw it as a possibility – but only if the very specific conditions he identified were met. If they were not, he considered it an option that could not be pursued.

(2) *Opening Address, November 1844*

Chalmers' opening address for the 1844-5 session is noteworthy in that it is a defence of the highly academic curriculum being established at New College. Citing the field of Biblical Criticism as a crucial battleground of the faith, he argues that those fighting infidelity must receive the academic training necessary to refute the claims of infidel scholarship. Chalmers acknowledges that, on the one hand Scripture teaches of 'the mysteries of our holy faith being revealed unto babes and hidden from the wise and prudent', whilst

on the other hand, we are told of the importance of a learned ministry; and to provide this, have schools and colleges been established throughout all Christendom; and if not the whole encyclopaedia of human learning, at least a great part of it, must be traversed, ere access be had to its pulpits.⁵⁸

Thus, says Chalmers, 'in many minds there is a feeling of a certain discrepancy between the sayings of God's word and the doings of most of our modern

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

⁵⁸ Thomas Chalmers, 'Principal's Address, November 1844', in *Posthumous Works of the Rev. Thomas Chalmers*, Vol. 9, pp. 448-49.

churches.⁵⁹ He then sets about delineating ‘the respective places or functions which belong, on the one hand, to the education given at universities, and, on the other, to that teaching of God’s Spirit whereby the most unlettered of men might be made wise unto salvation.’⁶⁰ Chalmers argument is that a learned ministry is required in the battle against the rising challenges to the Bible’s inspiration and authority: ‘as war is unavoidable, there should in every Church be a school of preparation for the war,’ equipping ministers to defend the faith against attack.⁶¹ Thus he hopes to ‘disarm the prejudice of the humble and the pious against a learned ministry’ whilst disarming ‘the pride of that erudite theology’ which would overlook the one ‘whose only ostensible acquisitions in the world’s eye are that he reads his Bible and loves his saviour’.⁶²

The aim of New College is to ensure that whilst the Church has parted from the Establishment it will not part with the principle of having ‘a thorough, well-trained and well-educated ministry’. Again, the clear appeal to the Reformation is evident from Chalmers. The fact that such a huge sum had been raised for the building on the Mound ‘demonstrates of itself the unequalled reverence of our people for that high learning which signaled the John Knoxes, and the George Buchanans, and the Andrew Melvilles of other days’.⁶³ Chalmers ends with the stated aim of New College being to

secure a lettered and intellectual as well as a spiritual Church. That there shall be such a curriculum of high academic study, that ours may, with the blessing of God, prove as erudite and accomplished a ministry as any to be found in Christendom.⁶⁴

We are left in little doubt as to the core of Chalmers’ vision for New College here.

(3) *Opening Address, November 1845*

Chalmers’ opening address at New College in November 1845, the year Brown states that Chalmers really got on board with the vision for New College as a ‘free Christian university’, makes no specific reference to such a scheme. Only once at the end does he suggest that ‘ours might not only be a seminary for well-trained theologians, but that men of science and accomplished *savans* might have respect to it for the purposes of general education.’⁶⁵ Even in this instance, Chalmers is talking about his desire to see Natural History taught at New College, ‘and this for the sake of its far more abundant contributions to natural theology’.⁶⁶ Instead, the great burden of this speech, complementing that of the previous year, is in securing a pious *as well* as a learned ministry. When these two qualities are married together and in agreement, the Church prospers; when they are in opposition, she does not.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 453.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 460.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

⁶⁵ Thomas Chalmers, ‘Principal’s Address, November 1845’, in *Posthumous Works of the Rev. Thomas Chalmers*, Vol. 9, p. 481.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 481.

Again Chalmers makes reference to the Reformation in asserting that it was men of great learning *and* of great piety who were most notably used 'when the great transition from Popery to Protestantism was effected in our land.'⁶⁷ He goes on to state further the need for education in all levels of the Church, lest a priestly gulf emerge between the ministry and the people, and he defends the employment of catechists for this purpose. On the other hand, Chalmers does not back down when it come to the high academic bar set for those seeking entrance to the Free Church ministry, pointing out that there are a multitude of other ways for a Christian to serve Christ than through the pastoral office – in the family, and in the workplace, for example.⁶⁸ He thus maintains – echoing the previous year's address – that 'our future ministers shall go forth of our class-rooms with as high accomplishments in scholarship and science as any in Christendom'.⁶⁹

(4) Laying the Foundation Stone, June 1846

Prior to his opening address of November 1846, Chalmers made a speech at the laying of the foundation of stone of the New College building on the Mound, on 3rd June. At no point during this speech does he call New College a 'free Christian university'; only remarking once, rather equivocally, that 'within the walls now to be raised...there may or may not in time be delivered the lessons of general science'.⁷⁰ His opening words again show his main emphasis is on the creation of a learned ministry:

There is no substantial difference between the theology taught at a College, and the theology taught in a Church. Only in the preparation of ministers, whether for the work of instruction or for the work of defence, it is necessary that it should be taught in the forms of science, and receive an academic treatment in the hands of academic men.⁷¹

Chalmers goes on to underline in no uncertain terms the central purpose of New College:

The great object, then, of an education here, is that our pupils may learn to understand this Bible, to handle it aright in plying the hearts and consciences of men. It is to teach them how best to wield that instrument which alone is mighty for the pulling down of strongholds.⁷²

The aim of New College, he goes on, is that Scotland will enjoy the blessing of 'well-filled pulpits and well-served parishes'.⁷³ Chalmers then addresses the working classes amongst those gathered on the Mound, affirming the equal value of every human soul and expressing his desire for 'a more elevated ground floor for our general population' in social and economic terms – but he does not appear to be specifically tying New College to such a vision, except that in it will train ministers who will be uniquely equipped to converse with, and minister to, the most humble and most noble in rank.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 464.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

⁷⁰ Watt, *New College, Edinburgh*, p. 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Taken alongside his earlier opening addresses, a well-defined picture is emerging of the high value that Chalmers placed on thorough and intellectually demanding academic study for the training of ministers for the purposes of ‘instruction’ and ‘defence’. Here in particular he brings out the central importance of studying the Bible, with training in the right handling of Scripture being essential to the ‘healing of our families’ as well as for the defending of the faith.

The equivocal nature of Chalmers’ speech with regard to New College’s scope comes into even sharper definition when it is compared with the journalist Hugh Miller’s reflections on the same event in the Free Church newspaper *The Witness*. Miller, like Chalmers, starts out with the measured recognition that all is far from settled with regards to New College’s future. However, he then nails his own colours firmly to the mast:

But we confess that all our leanings are in favour of the larger plan...letters and the sciences were found a valuable ally in the case of the first Reformation. Their influence has not by any means diminished since that time, and their instrumentality is by far too important not to be *especially* enlisted on the side of the present Reformation. With such men as the Free Church could command, her College might be made the head-quarters, not of Scotland only, but of all Protestant Christendom.⁷⁴

This, undeniably, is a manifesto for a free Christian university of the sort that Welsh had advanced three years earlier – but it is voiced by Miller, not Chalmers.

(5) *Opening Address, November 1846*

This takes us to Chalmers’ final address, at the beginning of New College’s 1846-47 academic session. Once again, Chalmers does not outline any kind of vision for what was, according to Brown, his dream for New College at this point. Rather, he devotes the talk to a consideration of the qualities necessary for a college Principal.⁷⁵ A *tour de force* of Chalmers’ polymathic literary, historical, scientific, and philosophical insights, it nonetheless speaks of all these fields with regard to their ultimate bearing on theology. It is Chalmers at his most expansive, and an occasion which, given the setting, would have been perfectly suited for holding forth the idea of a greatly extended educational role for New College beyond that presently offered. However, no such ideal is propounded.

(6) *The death of Chalmers*

Chalmers died during the General Assembly of 1847, as he was writing that year’s College Committee report. A year to the day after he had laid the foundation stone for the New College building, his own body was laid to rest. Within four years of the Disruption, two highly influential figures in the project to establish a theological institution which would equip the Free Church with ‘as erudite and accomplished a ministry as any to be found in Christendom’ had passed away. In its founders Welsh and Chalmers, the

⁷⁴ ‘The Free Church College’, in *Witness*, 4th June 1846.

⁷⁵ Thomas Chalmers, ‘Principal’s Address, November 1846’, in *Posthumous Works of the Rev. Thomas Chalmers*, Vol. 9, pp. 482–83.

importance placed on academic attainment and intellectual prestige at New College had a dual authority which only served to become immortalised on their deaths.

However in terms of the scope of education, whilst Welsh had clearly hoped that New College would become something akin to a university, this appears to have been, at the very least, something that Chalmers was far more pragmatic about. It was not the subject of any speech he made at occasions which would have peculiarly lent themselves to giving voice to such a conviction. The comment made by A.C. Cheyne that due to 'the soaring aspirations of Chalmers and his colleagues...they thought of a rival to the existing University's "Old College" rather than a mere theological seminary', misrepresents Chalmers as being the lead voice in such a movement.⁷⁶ Rather it was not Chalmers but the less-known Welsh who had given full expression to this idea, and the likes of Hugh Miller who would subsequently urge it on the Free Church after Welsh's death.

4. William Cunningham: continuity and controversy

In the wake of Chalmers' death, Dr Robert Gordon of the Free High Church in Edinburgh was offered the post of Principal of New College, but he declined.⁷⁷ This paved the way for the third figure who made a lasting impression on all aspects of the New College vision in its earliest years: Dr William Cunningham. Like Welsh and Chalmers, he possessed a deep commitment to a learned ministry and a profound self-identification with the work of Reformation.⁷⁸ Cunningham expressed a clear commitment to continuity with Chalmers when he addressed the students as the new Principal of New College on 9th November 1847. He said he hoped to 'imbibe more of the spirit of our lamented father, and to follow out more fully the conceptions which he had formed of a theological institute.'⁷⁹

During his mission to America, which lasted from December 1844 to May 1845, Cunningham had visited Princeton Theological Seminary, Harvard College, and Andover Seminary. He returned to Princeton on a further two occasions, and his impressions of both the institution and its renowned Principal Charles Hodge, with whom he stayed for several days, appear to have had significant bearing on his conception of what New College should be. In particular, he observed the far more interactive lessons taking place there – in stark contrast to the *ex cathedra* lectures typical of Scottish universities – and on the whole he approved of the American model. This was something Chalmers too had wanted to encourage at New College.⁸⁰ Whilst Cunningham was impressed with Hodge and Princeton, the feeling was mutual. Of him Hodge wrote: 'I do not recollect of ever having met any one to whom I was so much drawn,

⁷⁶ A. C. Cheyne, *Studies in Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), p. 244.

⁷⁷ *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ*, Vol. 1, p. 61.

⁷⁸ Honeycutt, 'William Cunningham', p. 302.

⁷⁹ William Cunningham, *Inaugural Lecture Addressed to the Students of the Free Church of Scotland, 1847* (Edinburgh, 1848), pp. 22–23, quoted in Honeycutt, 'William Cunningham', p. 235.

⁸⁰ Chalmers, 'Principal's Address, November 1845', p. 472.

and for whom I entertained so high a respect and so warm a regard as I did for him, on such short acquaintance.⁸¹

(1) *Theological study*

It was Cunningham who had replaced David Welsh in the Chair of Church History at New College upon the latter's death in 1845. Cunningham's great contribution to the field was his recasting of it as 'Historical Theology'. This saw a great shift in emphasis away from the mere 'external' history of the Church towards the development of its doctrine through the controversies of successive ages. Cunningham believed this new approach would have significantly greater bearing upon, and relevance to, a theological curriculum for the training of ministers. Says Robert Rainy (who would later become Principal himself): 'The class, he thought, could retain its claims on the Church and the student, only if it fulfilled some definite function, closely related to the main end of theological education, which is to train the student to a scientific apprehension of the truth which God has revealed.'⁸²

This was truly a significant development in the educational approach of New College in comparison to the universities. Further, Cunningham's identification of the purpose of theological training – 'a scientific apprehension of the truth which God has revealed' – extended beyond his own sphere of Historical Theology and shaped his vision for New College as a whole. Rainy, who was a student in Cunningham's first class at New College in 1844-5, explains:

This is to be effected along a double line of training. On the one hand, the discipline of Biblical study and interpretation (which, he thought, ought to extend along the whole course—four years in the Free Church) trains the student to evolve the teaching of the sacred record, and places him in constant contact with revealed truth, in the very form which God has been pleased to deliver it. On the other hand, Systematic Theology, proceeding on Biblical ground and working with Biblical materials, develops the body of main truths in their rational coherence; not shutting out of view the debates that have been raised, yet still mainly occupied with positive construction. Meanwhile, the class of Historic Theology, which he placed somewhat lower than the other two in point of absolute necessity and importance, takes up the same body of belief, as belief which has been eagerly questioned, and which has, to a large extent, been shaped and cleared in the fire of controversy.⁸³

Cunningham too considered preparatory training in 'arts and philosophy' to be necessary, particularly in directing students' private reading and reflections outside lectures, whilst urging that students be competent in Hebrew *prior* to their arrival at New College so that could immediately begin exegesis in the original languages at the commencement of their studies.⁸⁴ At its core, this was the kind of theological curriculum which would have met with both Welsh's and

⁸¹ Robert Rainy and James Mackenzie, *Life of William Cunningham, D.D. : Principal and Professor of Theology and Church History, New College, Edinburgh* (London: Nelson, 1871), p. 206.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

Chalmers' endorsement and, significantly, delivered on Chalmers' commitment to an institution dedicated to the systematic study of the Bible in the original languages. Cunningham also supported a 'Junior' and 'Senior' class system which allowed all students to follow the History and Systematic Theology courses in the proper order – a reform of the traditional university approach.⁸⁵

(2) Spiritual formation

Cunningham may have been as keenly intellectual in some respects as his predecessors, but he also followed Chalmers in his active interest in his students' spiritual wellbeing as well as their academic attainment. It is important to strike the correct balance in terms of Cunningham's views here. The primary object of a seminary, he believed, was the efficient training of the students in the subjects given above. However, he also maintained that

to promote the spiritual wellbeing of students is a part of the work of teachers of theology...It is an object which theological teachers, in the discharge of their functions as such, are bound to aim at.⁸⁶

In an Assembly debate on the spiritual state of the students, quoted by Rainy, Cunningham lamented that in this key area New College had been found wanting:

What we are defective in is just this, that we come all far short in a due sense of the obligations under which we lie to aim at the spiritual welfare of those committed to our care. We ought to feel as strongly our responsibility and concern in the spiritual welfare of our theological students, as in the spiritual welfare of those who are our children according to the flesh.⁸⁷

Cunningham's concern for his students both present and past was reciprocated by a lifelong affection and loyalty among many of his students.⁸⁸

(3) Defender of New College

Cunningham's commitment to Welsh's and Chalmers' vision of the Free Church producing the best-trained ministers in Christendom caused him jealously to defend the way in which he believed this vision should be realised – through a single institution, namely New College. Continued attempts to secure colleges elsewhere, he would later say, not only compromised the founders' vision for first-rate theological training for the Free Church's ministry, but in fact brought New College 'to the verge of ruin'.⁸⁹ For Cunningham, it was simple: the kind of comprehensive excellence aimed at by Welsh and Chalmers would be hard enough to achieve in one place, and it would bankrupt the Church if it was to be attempted in more. The result of extension would be a compromised curriculum, with the end result of an unevenly trained ministry.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 236-7.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-8.

⁸⁹ Honeycutt, 'William Cunningham', p. 262.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 261. In later years, Cunningham regarded his earlier fears as well-founded: 'The Church's willingness to accept three professors at Aberdeen justified, in Cunningham's mind, every statement he had ever voiced to the effect that college extension would inevitably result in lowered standards.'

Chalmers, too, appears to have been against quickly founding colleges elsewhere at the expense of what was being established at New College. His enthusiasm for provincial *gymnasia* which could provide the preparatory education necessary before students went on to theological studies in Edinburgh provided an alternative to a multi-college plan. As it was, the Free Church would become increasingly hamstrung between the objective of establishing a first-rate and comprehensive institution in Edinburgh and the demands of 'extensionists' to establish theological colleges in Glasgow and Aberdeen. Although the 'Colleges Controversy', as it would be called, would reach its most embittered height in the years immediately after the scope of this study, it had already well begun in the 1840s.

Without our becoming mired in what was a long and fractious debate, it would be hard to think of anyone else with the force of personality required to fight so successfully for the cause of New College as Cunningham did for several years. His consistent opposition to the claims of other towns in the 1840s at least allowed New College to establish itself in its new home on the Mound before the controversy would finally turn in favour of extension.

(4) From foundations to finished building: 1850

By November 1850, hundreds of churches, manses, and schools across Scotland had been established under the auspices of a denomination which had not existed only eight years before. As if to cap it all, the formidable structure of the Free Church's New College was officially opened in the heart of the nation's capital. As that year's Free Church Moderator, Nathaniel Paterson, declared at its opening: 'The New College stands associated with 700 Free Churches, built in seven years, and with nearly as many schools in connection with these churches.'⁹¹ With five Divinity Professors as well as Chairs of Logic, Moral Philosophy, and Natural Science, it offered 'the most comprehensive and complete course of theological education supplied by any British Institution'.⁹² By this stage Cunningham had been Principal for three years, and the building's inauguration was marked by lectures from all of the Faculty, which now included two of the foremost Free Church theologians of the age, James Bannerman and James Buchanan. Cunningham's opening address affords us the opportunity of seeing how the vision for New College had developed since 1843. It is undeniable that Cunningham was very much focused on the institution principally as the place where Free Church candidates would be trained. The main object of a seminary, he said, was to ensure 'that the students all acquire a respectable measure of those qualifications for the ministry, which may be tested and ascertained by examination.'⁹³ More specifically, this involved

initiating the students into the critical and accurate investigation of the meaning of the sacred Scriptures, in the original languages, upon sound principles, and conducting them over a considerable portion of the inspired volume.⁹⁴

⁹¹ 'Address of Dr. Paterson', in Cunningham, *Inauguration of the New College*, p. 31.

⁹² Hanna, *Memoirs of Thomas Chalmers*, Vol. 4, p. 426.

⁹³ 'Address delivered at the Opening of the New College', Cunningham, *Inauguration of the New College*, p. 46.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

In keeping with New College's other founders, Cunningham appealed to the Scottish Reformers to advocate a much greater emphasis on study of the Bible:

There seems to have been a just appreciation of the importance of this object in the older schemes of Scottish theological education, in the time of Andrew Melville, and at the period of what we commonly call the Second Reformation. But there can be no reasonable doubt, that for the last century and a half it has been grievously neglected amongst us.⁹⁵

The heart of Cunningham's speech is an impassioned plea for much greater provision to be made for teaching the skills necessary for serious exegesis of the Biblical text, and this would require two Chairs in Exegetical Theology, in Old and New Testament respectively.⁹⁶ Overall, the address is striking in its confessed commitment to following through the reforms to theological study that were expressed in Welsh's first speech in 1843.

(5) Only a Dream? S.J. Brown's portrayal of Cunningham

It becomes us here to offer something by way of redress to the comments made about Cunningham's principalship by Stewart J. Brown in 'The Disruption and the Dream'. In the oxymoronically entitled section 'Dogmatism and Realism: the Cunningham Years', Brown first asserts that 'there had been general agreement that resources should be invested to make New College a free Christian university. Following his [Chalmers'] death, however, this vision was increasingly challenged.'⁹⁷ As we hope that we have shown, Chalmers did not have a clear vision for such an institution, and the 'general agreement' alluded to (but unreferenced) by Brown for such a vision within the Church was in fact far from general, and was highly conditional, hinging, as it did for many, on the fate of Free Church professors in the established universities. Reflecting this, we have already noted that no agreement could be achieved on New College's constitution in the General Assembly in these early years.

Brown then claims, again with no appeal to sources, that Cunningham had 'an abiding sense of self-righteousness', before going on to describe his theological convictions as 'narrow and rigid scholastic Calvinism, including a belief in predestination'.⁹⁸ This appears to be a further attempt to draw a hero-villain distinction that has been part of Brown's design since the introduction to the essay. There he pits Chalmers – a 'liberal evangelical social theologian' – against Cunningham – 'a conservative Calvinist historical theologian'. Yet Chalmers was also a conservative Calvinist, and by highlighting Cunningham's belief in predestination as a point of difference, Brown attempts to drive a theological wedge between the two that is non-existent. Chalmers was just as committed to the doctrine of predestination as Cunningham. Indeed, he dedicated a series of lectures to the subject and said of his own views in relation to those of the Calvinist theologian Jonathan Edwards: 'I may here state that my convictions are entire as his were on the

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

⁹⁷ Brown, 'The Disruption and the Dream', p. 43.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

side of a rigid and absolute predestination.⁹⁹ The word ‘rigid’ is used here by Chalmers, of himself.

Next, Brown points to Cunningham’s describing New College as ‘a theological seminary’ in his 1850 speech as indicating that the vision was ‘narrowing its focus to theological study, and turning away from the perception of itself as a university’.¹⁰⁰ However, in Chalmers’ 1846 speech at the laying of New College’s foundation stone, he at no point called it a university either. In fact, he referred to it in precisely the same terms as Cunningham: as a ‘theological seminary’.¹⁰¹ This attempt to draw a contrast between Chalmers and Cunningham with regard to the use of terminology is therefore also without warrant.

Finally, Brown’s main assertion in this section is that the vision for New College fundamentally changed when Cunningham took over: ‘he lacked the broad-minded vision of Chalmers and his enthusiasm for the idea of a free university’.¹⁰² However, as Cunningham’s 1847 and 1850 speeches reflect, he was confessedly carrying on the plan for theological education expressed by Chalmers. In particular, his commitment to the reform of theological study to include junior and senior classes; his striving for an institution that was ‘fully equipped’ with a range of first-rate professors; and his desire to promote the sustained study of the Bible in the original languages – what we would now call Biblical Studies – are all in clear continuity with Chalmers. As for ‘Chalmers and his enthusiasm for the idea of a free university’, we have drawn attention to the fact that if there was such an enthusiasm, it was left oddly under-expressed, despite numerous opportunities for Chalmers so to do.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, all of the founders of New College shared a common vision: to offer the best theological education in Scotland, on a radically improved footing from that offered in the existing universities in terms of content, structure, and breadth. They also all saw the Disruption as a new chapter in the history of Reformation in Scotland. A clear identification with the men and the manifestos of that era shaped Welsh’s, Chalmers’, and Cunningham’s ideas of the part that New College would play in both directing and defending the Third Reformation. An uncompromising approach to academic rigour and attainment was the hallmark of the institution’s early days, in keeping with the high premium placed by all three on the need for a learned ministry which could defend the Church from attacks emerging from the fields of science, philosophy, and, increasingly, scholarship from Germany which questioned the Bible’s inspiration and reliability.

On the scope of New College, there was a clear difference in viewpoint. David Welsh had wanted the best of all worlds: initially three theological colleges in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Aberdeen, with New College at least

⁹⁹ Thomas Chalmers, *Institutes of Theology*, ed. William Hanna (2 vols., Edinburgh: Thomas Constable and Co., 1856), Vol. 2, p. 85.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, ‘The Disruption and the Dream’, p. 46.

¹⁰¹ Watt, *New College, Edinburgh*, p. 2.

¹⁰² Brown, ‘The Disruption and the Dream’, p. 43.

developing into a full university. However, the great financial expectations on which these hopes rested were not realised; neither was the widespread imposition of tests in the universities that may have produced more support for the project. Chalmers may well have desired to see New College grow into a larger institution in due time, but we believe we have demonstrated that this was both conditional and not something he was urging on the Church with anything like the forcefulness of other figures in the denomination. Recognising this affords us the proper perspective from which to view the real priorities of Chalmers' principalship.

Finally, we hope to have shown that there was far greater continuity between Chalmers' and Cunningham's convictions and commitments during this period of New College's history than has been suggested elsewhere.

The controversies of later days are outside the scope of this study, and one may ponder whether any cracks were present in New College's foundations that might have widened into the fissures of the future. As it is, we can but sum up our conclusions on the founders' original vision: the creation of a learned, pious, and orthodox ministry.