

Pitlochry Days

WHEELER ROBINSON was minister of Pitlochry Baptist Church from 1900 to 1903. A young man of twenty-eight he came fresh from studies at the Universities of Oxford and Edinburgh with a reputation as a biblical scholar and theologian.

Somewhat reserved and austere in manner he did not readily make friends but before many months had passed it was obvious from reports in the local newspapers that he had become involved in many branches of Christian work in the community. He wholeheartedly supported the work of the local branch of the Temperance Society and at a crowded meeting in one of the village halls he declared that the time had come for carrying out a substantial measure of temperance reform and moved that a resolution be submitted to Parliament asking that a Bill on the lines of Lord Peel's Report be introduced and that copies of this resolution be sent to the Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State for Scotland. From time to time he is reported as having been the chief speaker at the Temperance meetings. He was also a strong supporter of the Christian Union Society giving lectures and talks.

By May 1902 he appears to have been in indifferent health and was granted a month's leave of absence to recuperate. Before the end of the year he gave a lecture on Robert Browning this being the second of a series of lectures on literary topics which had been arranged. This lecture was illustrated by songs from Browning's poems sung by Mrs. Robinson.

In January 1903 he delivered a lecture on John Bunyan at Fin-castle, a remote glen several miles to the north of Pitlochry, and during the years his name appears as a guest speaker at social functions in all the neighbouring churches.

In February 1903 a deputation consisting of the ministers of the Established Church (the name formerly given to the Church of Scotland), the Episcopal Church, and the United Free Church called at the Baptist Manse and in the name of a number of friends and well-wishers presented him with a purse of sovereigns "as a token of their personal esteem and of their appreciation of the able lectures recently given by him in the afternoons at Wellwood" (one of the larger houses in the district).

At a lecture delivered in the Established Church, the subject again being "John Bunyan", the minister on behalf of the congregation thanked Wheeler Robinson warmly and remarked how willing the speaker always was to assist in every project in the Established Church.

But if his relations with his brother ministers and their congregations were always cordial, his own congregation was passing through a difficult time. One wonders if his illness in May 1902 was not unconnected with the divisions and tensions in the Baptist church. Here we have a small body of men and women. Their deacons, included a shepherd, a stonemason, a colporteur and a lawyer. Of these only the latter had any academic training.

The language of the home and of everyday life at that time was Gaelic of which Wheeler Robinson was ignorant. Not that his deacons were "unlearned and ignorant" men. On their bookshelves were to be found the works of John Bunyan, the sermons of Charles Spurgeon, Cruden's Concordance, Lives of Christ, Bible Commentaries. (These books are before me on the shelves of my father's bookcase). The colporteur with his wallet on his back tramped many miles each day, visiting lonely farmhouses bringing books and tracts to all with whom there was a willingness to learn. He usually had a word or two of witness and a prayer before he moved on to the next croft or farmhouse. His prayers in his native Gaelic were eloquent and moving but with his minister there may have been what is now termed "difficulties of communication".

Wheeler Robinson's academic background tended to make him find his personal friends among those who were called the "upper classes". In the early years of the 20th century the distinction between the "upper classes" and the "working classes" was quite clearly defined.

Wheeler Robinson was not a good visitor. His predecessor, a Welshman, was a frequent visitor to my home and was regarded as a friend but I have no recollection of Wheeler Robinson ever paying us a visit.

Bitter quarrels arose in the church, in many cases over what were trivial matters. He was accused, as a result of his drawing-room lectures at "Wellwood", of sharing his learning only with those who were socially acceptable, with those who had the means and the leisure to attend afternoon lectures. His bitterest quarrel was, however, with his church secretary, the banker. Whether the dispute was over a matter of doctrine or of policy no one knows. His church secretary who combined the professions of banker and solicitor was a dedicated Baptist who, because there was no baptistry in the wooden shed used as a church by the founder members of the church, elected as a youth, to profess his faith by being baptised in a rocky pool in the River Tummel which flows past the village.

It may be that these two men were too alike in temperament, that, having differed, each held tenaciously to his own point of view. The writer in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* speaks of Wheeler Robinson's "austerity of character and his iron self discipline and devotion to duty". Somewhat similar qualities could be applied to Alexander Macbeth, the strong personality among the deacons. Each might well say like St. Paul of Peter, "I withstood him to the face because he was to be blamed".

The rift between them steadily widened and I can remember the sense of horror that came over me when Wheeler Robinson openly attacked Macbeth from the pulpit. Fearing that my boyhood memory might have played me tricks, I consulted the local *Perthshire Advertiser* and found under the date December 1902 this paragraph headed "An unusual incident in a Church" but with no names given.

"For some time past it was known that certain members of one of our local congregations and the minister were not exactly pulling together, and that the offending member, who occupied a back seat in the church, was in the habit of annoying the minister during his sermon by scowling and making faces of a hideous nature, his pew being so situated that none but the minister could see what was going on. On Sunday, however, the congregation were rather startled by the minister stopping in the middle of his sermon and rebuking the offending party by complaining to the congregation about the contortion of countenances assumed by one of the members during his sermons. He said it was a year since it was started and he thought it now time it was put a stop to as he could not stand it much longer. The incident caused considerable speculation amongst the other members of the congregation. The incident is to be regretted as the minister is a most able divine and highly respected by all".

It was commonly reported, and for this I have only hearsay, that the minister's text that day was II Timothy 4:14 "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil. The Lord reward him according to his works".

Wheeler Robinson said he could "stand it no longer" and no wonder. Yet from my recollection of Alexander Macbeth, "scowling and making faces of a hideous nature" was quite out of keeping with the man who, after my father's death, was to me a protector and friend for many years.

I seem to remember that, some years afterwards, Wheeler Robinson wrote a letter of apology, admitting that he had been in the wrong. What the response to that letter was, I cannot say.

One other cause of contention arose from a gift to the church from an English visitor who, though a member of the Church of England, frequently worshipped in the Baptist Church because she admired Wheeler Robinson and enjoyed his sermons. She offered to present to the church a new organ to replace the rather wheezy old harmonium then in use. The minister, naturally, accepted this gift and it was duly installed. One dissident voice was raised, however, to point out that in accordance with clause three of the Constitution of the Church (dated 1881) no gift could be accepted without prior consultation with the church members. With such constant harassment and pin-pricking it is a wonder that the minister continued to preach till September 1903.

On Sunday, September 13th he preached his farewell sermon taking

for his text Jeremiah 20:9. "Then I said, I will not make mention of him nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones and I was very weary with forebearing and I could not stay".

The *Advertiser* of September 16th gives a short summary of the sermon. "The preacher declared that no confession of faith, no creeds were of value without personal appropriation. No one was more conscious of the faults and the limitations of his pulpit and ministry than he was but that during the last three years he had done his best. That was the utmost any man can say. He could only pray that God would use that for the best so that they might treasure up some memories in their hearts not of him or of his words but of the truths of which he had been so imperfect a channel."

Undoubtedly his short stay did much for the ultimate enrichment of the community. That Wheeler Robinson should have preached in Pitlochry Baptist Church to no effect is unthinkable and it may be that these years were part of that training and discipline which was to bring this great Baptist theologian and leader to his full maturity.

DONALD T. FORBES.

Wheeler Robinson the Principal 1920-42

I THINK it was Mr. Neville Cardus who said that when he was on the staff of the *Manchester Guardian* and had occasion to see his chief, he would pause for a moment outside the door of his room, and brace himself, physically and mentally, for the coming interview. One did not lightly confront Mr. C. P. Scott. The same might be said with truth of Principal Wheeler Robinson. Indeed, there was not a little in common between the famous newspaper editor and the College principal. Both were men of stainless, personal integrity, to whom the claims of duty were paramount. Neither could tolerate laziness, inefficiency or deceit. And when they "scorned delights and lived laborious days", it was not because Fame was their spur, but because they were consumed by the conviction that life is a trust to be used to the full, and the promotion of truth and righteousness in the earth is at once man's highest obligation and his lasting joy. Despite great differences of belief and calling, these two men were kindred