# THE COATS FAMILY AND PAISLEY BAPTISTS[1]

*continued**

## VI

There were three kinds of Coatses: thread, ham and ministerial. So far it is the assimilation of the thread Coatses to fashionable and public life that has been stressed. If their slippage from felt religion was natural, their Baptist tenacity should nonetheless be noted for there were Baptist thread Coatses from Storie Street's early days to the 1960s. J. and P. Coats's benevolence to Baptist or Baptist-friendly causes was to be relied on: a subscription, for example, in 1858 to the strict communionist Baptist Evangelical Society, the small but persistent body from which descends Northern Baptist College, Manchester; in 1858 nearly a quarter of that society's income came from Scotland.[2] In the 1860s there was support for William Quarrier, the Baptist founder of orphanages and uniformed brigades for working boys. That led naturally to support for that Scottish artefact of the 1880s, the Boys' Brigade. Paisley quickly had a company and in 1888 Coatses were among the guarantors of a trust fund to provide a salary for the Brigade's founder-organiser.[3]

That, no doubt, was sensible industrial benevolence but it was born of ingrained attitudes. In the 1940s one of Thomas Coats's granddaughters who had married south of the border mused 'in her broad Scotch (or is it Glasgow?) accent, "I quite realized when I married . . . that they were the squirearchy, whereas I was only a tradesman's daughter. Our ethical standards were entirely dissimilar. I had to adapt myself to the family I had married into."'[4] Three years later and on the same theme she 'said the aristocracy was played out and that God had arranged for their economic eclipse to coincide with the decline of their morals'.[5] That was small talk. Her father might have been a tradesman but he was also the first Coats peer and his Glen Tanar was far from any shop. But it was the small talk of an independent pride in family values.

Similarly with Catherine Mitchell, who married the first James Coats and whose employment of tambourers had led to the family's first textile fortune and thus to Ferguslie. She was also given a birthday dinner party in a son's new house in Glasgow:

> After dinner, I proposed her health. When I concluded, the clever old lady stood up, prefaced her speech with a few well-timed remarks, and for several minutes gave utterance to sentiments of duty, religion, honour, honesty, humanity, and the various duties we ought to impose on ourselves, with a degree of cleverness which I have rarely listened to before, and sat down with tears of joy and satisfaction streaming down her venerable face.[6]

Catherine Mitchell Coats was an undeviating United Presbyterian, worshipping in her own church on Sunday afternoons, but there also spoke a Paisley Pen wife,

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notwithstanding the restriction of Sabbath exhortation to males. James Coats himself was a trustee of Storie Street from 1811, which was perhaps the family's first *official* connection with the cause. He sat to the left of the pulpit, serving (or was it his son James?) on the church's rebuilding committee in 1837 and signally intervening five years later when he moved that a delegation of Glasgow Baptists, come to mediate in what was leading to Storie Street's first major secession, be not heard since such interference was uncongregational.[7]

Of James's sons, Peter, once intended for the ministry, was a Storie Street activist in 1843, sitting on the rebuilding committee and becoming a trustee. Under the system of dual control prevailing from 1839 to 1860 Peter Coats became a church manager and audited its accounts. He was also the first civic Coats since Paisley's Free Library, Museum and Picture Gallery was his gift.[8] Andrew was the Coats who developed his father's Reform radicalism into the full flower of the Manchester School, Scotch-American style, writing memoirs to demonstrate 'the results that may be attained by the honest efforts of an individual in the humblest sphere of life', and taking as epigraph John Bright's 'The Nation Dwells in Cottages'.[9] There was a breezy scepticism about Andrew's Storie-Street-formed mentality. For him Coffee Kirk was 'where we could toast our buns and crack our jokes not infrequently, I fear, at the expense of the quaint old fashioned people who held forth during the service.' Andrew's memories were of listening twice on Sundays 'to what was not suited to our capacities and far less to our taste'.[10] Nonetheless, it was Andrew who presented *Reminiscences of the Pen Folk* to Perth's library and whose Christmas gift of 1893 to Henry Drummond, the broad evangelical scientist, was the copy of *From the Cottage to the Castle* now with the National Library of Scotland;[11] and Andrew's transatlantic business contacts owed everything to his Paisley and kirk-dissident connections. Thomas, the second Civic Coats, first Chairman of Paisley's School Board, President of Paisley's Philosophical Society, donor of Paisley's Observatory (surely one of Britain's first public buildings to have facilities for the disabled).[12] Thomas was the only Coats of his generation to worship lifelong at Storie Street. Baptized there in 1860, he was a trustee, a church manager and auditor, although never a deacon.[13] He presented the church's first pipe organ. He was also the first Coats to be denominationally prominent, for in 1873-4 he was President of the Baptist Union of Scotland. As his ham-curing cousin put it, Thomas 'could hardly be called a fighting man. He rather resembled the dog of whom his master said "He is very quiet and inoffensive, but if he once gets a hold, heaven and earth could not make him let go".'[14]

It was Thomas's children who best sustained these links. Though the eldest son, James (in Oliver Flett's estimation 'about the best man I ever knew'),[15] neither joined nor regularly attended a church, his piety was transformed through yachts into sensible philanthropy: Coats Memorial, of course, but also Paisley's Observatory, schools, and new infirmary (on condition that it be fireproofed); there were books, pipes and tobacco for every Scottish lighthouse; libraries on a Carnegie scale for Scottish towns, villages and schools, with lecturers to stimulate their use and oculists sent in to test aged eyes unable to read the print - always 'kind things which no one else seemed to think of doing'.[16] The eldest daughter, Janet, was similarly

sensible: £20,000 to the Glasgow Indigent Ladies Society with a preference for indigent Paisley ladies; £5000 to the Royal Alexandra Infirmary. Until she married into the publishing Blacks and left Paisley, Janet was Storie Street's organist.[17]

The second son, Thomas Glen-Coats, most representatively displayed the thread Coats' commitment. Inevitably a public Coats, he founded Paisley's Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor with his wife and later gave a Hospital for Sick Children in her memory, succeeded his father as Chairman of the School Board, commanded a volunteer battalion, played his part in Liberal politics and county affairs.[18] The inevitable baronetcy coincided with the double-barrelling of his surname and the opening of Coats Memorial. It was Glen-Coats who was the chief facilitator of the new Sunday Schools, who bought the Storie Street site from the church and ensured that its organ went to the George Street Baptists.[19] Perhaps it was Glen-Coats who dominated Coats Memorial. Certainly he chaired crucial meetings, and was aware of the danger of his position:

> I often tried to persuade him to become a Deacon of the Church, but he always declined, saying that he would rather work and advise quietly behind the scenes. He shrank from putting himself in the limelight. And with regard to the Diaconate, I fancy that he thought his presence might have the effect of repressing the free exchange of opinion and suggestion on the part of those less accustomed to sitting on committees and boards and such like.[20]

Fifty years after the opening of Coats Memorial there were still five Coatses on the trust, two of Thomas's daughters and three grandchildren. Of these Thomas Heywood Coats was a firm adherent, sitting in the back west transept pew, representing his fellow adherents on the church's pastoral vacancy committee.[21] His cousin Harold was the last to live at Ferguslie and to maintain the full tradition. Major Harold Glen-Coats's 'whole anxiety was to see that the relationship between his family and the church . . . was maintained'.[22] He was a church member. With his brother, the second Sir Thomas, he sat on the Finance Committee and eventually chaired it, he worried over the fabric and music, he succeeded the first Sir Thomas as President of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. He even had a good War, out in Gallipoli, Egypt and Palestine - where he talked much to his me of the life of Christ.[23] Alas, he died young and Ferguslie was presented to the Infirmary as an annexe. His brother, sister and widow continued the spirit of his commitment, in his widow's case sustained into the 1960s: Mrs Harold Coats's was always the first Christmas tree at the Sunday School Primary Department's parties and her Christmas list of people who needed help meant a cheque for each, generous in itself and sent tactfully early to allow for strategically festive planning.[24]

## VII

The ham Coatses, their 'Petticoats' nickname notwithstanding, were senior to the thread Coatses. Their Baptistness was both more awkward and more representative. Their founder, Jervis Coats (1772-1838), the first James's elder brother, left weaving for grocery. From Jervis Coats (1812), and Son (1821), grew the ham-curing business of W. and A. Coats (1858), Limited (1906). The tradition is that

the soundly based grocer Coatses declined to put their money into anything as risky as thread, but also that Jervis was a reluctant grocer since 'no man could be a grocer and an honest man'.[25] Given the long history of food adulteration, that was likely, but Jervis was a man to turn dishonesty to good account.[26]

The curing of beef hams with pickle and spice, from an English recipe of his grandmother's, began with Jervis's son, William Holms Coats (1798-1889), whom only providential mortality preserved from a career at Ferguslie.[27] In public life W. H. Coats was on the Town Council; in church life he served with Peter and James on the 1837 rebuilding committee and, like Peter and Thomas, he became a church manager. From 1839 to 1851 he was church treasurer. At Storie Street he once joined the band of exhorters: 'I thought from the ability he shewed in judging other people's sermons that, should he ever try to deliver one, he would outshine all former exhorters. But, alas, alas!'[28] He was not an easy man ('. . . too strictly truthful for our comfort')[29] but there was no antique Calvinism in his hardness. His was a house which observed the Biblical prohibitions on 'things strangled and from blood' but was also 'probably the first house in Paisley in which the piano was opened on Sunday'.[30] Neither was it a teetotal house, save for a fortnight after J. B. Gough, the temperance advocate, had stayed with them: 'I never saw my father the worse of drink, but often the better of it. It mellowed his natural irritability.'[31] For five months each summer the W. H. Coats house was Willow Bank, in Dunoon, seven-bed-roomed with a two-wheeler in the coach house, but it was some time before the family's Dunoon Sundays were Baptist Sundays, for at first there were sittings at the Episcopalian Church since:

> These Anglican clergymen were educated men who had been to Oxford or Cambridge, who put on no ministerial superiority, but talked from the pulpit without affectation and with the same voice and tone which they used out of it. Their reading of the prayers and of the lessons, and their unpretentious and devout bearing formed a not unimportant part of our education, by giving us examples of how English should be spoken by gentle and reverent men.[32]

Eventually, of course, there had to be a Baptist cause in Dunoon and W. H. Coats became its treasurer and a trustee, but it cannot have been an accident that its summer supplies were well-known English ministers.[33]

There were other fallings away from Scotch Baptist ways. If the visiting English ministers often summered at Willow Bank, other English visitors stayed with the W. H. Coatses in Paisley. One of these was Thomas Cooper, the reformed Chartist, who had Storie Street on his preaching and lecturing circuit. Cooper was a Baptist but his wife was a Methodist and there came the communion when the unbaptized Mrs Cooper sat down with her husband at the Storie Street table. A deacon asked her to 'sit back'. Her husband told her to sit still. His explanation was crisp: 'If it had been an old sinner like himself, he could have understood it, but for them to attempt to turn away his wife from the Lord's Table, who was an angel, and ten times more worthy then himself to sit down, was an outrage'.[34] Open communion came soon after, but William Holms Coats as not there to see it. In 1866, the year when his daughter married Oliver Flett, Storie Street's minister,

William and two of his sons seceded to the new cause in Victoria Place. He disapproved the marriage, though he countenanced it. Though doctrine and order can be a respectable explanation, such family matters tend more to disruption than doctrine.[35]

The ham-curing sons who accompanied him to Victoria Place, William junior (1831-97) and Allan (1833-1905), had also been Storie Street officeholders, both of them as church managers and auditors of accounts, William as treasurer 1854-1865 and Allan as secretary 1856-1858. Allan was the teetotal Coats; he became denominationally prominent.[36] A third ham-curing son, George Holms Coats of Ellangowan (1842-1924), stayed with Storie Street. George had a way with words and an eye for women. He was opinionated, prejudiced and go-ahead. All of this tumbles about in his *Rambling Recollections*, that admirable pendant to Andrew's *From Cottage to Castle*, and to *Reminiscences of the Pen Folk*. A man who describes a mango as 'a large stone with a blob of juice round it' has merit, even if the same man, encountering a fellow first-class passenger who was 'rather diminutive . . . with strong Jewish features' then finds him 'a clever, bright, merry, and well-educated Englishman' instead of 'a bounder and a Jew'.[37] He had wanted to be a boatbuilder, but entered the family business on sufferance and ended up as chairman. Psalmody and sympathy with Oliver Flett kept him at Storie Street. In 1866 George and his brother Jervis took a chapel singing class. At varying times he was chair of the Psalmody Committee and interim choirmaster; he was Sunday School Superintendent and leader of the Young Men's Bible Class; he was Church Treasurer for twenty years and treasurer of a church debt liquidation scheme; he was a deacon from 1871 and secretary to the Deacons' Court; in the difficult ministerial vacancy between 1894 and 1898 he chaired church meetings, secured pulpit supplies and once conducted a funeral; in civic bounds his grand commitment was the Infirmary over whose board and rebuilding he presided in the 1890s.

## VIII

George Holms Coats was the Scottish Baptist College's first Vice President. His brothers, Joseph William Coats and Jervis Holms Coats, were its first President and Principal respectively. The ministerial Coatses tended to be offshoots of the ham Coatses. They might be divided into two types: Coatses who became ministers and ministers who married Coatses. The first Coats minister was Jervis (b.1807), son of the Jervis the grocer and nephew of James of Ferguslie. He combined business in Glasgow with the co-pastorate of John Street B aptist Church, Glasgow, of which his younger son, Robert, also became co-pastor.[38] Jervis's nephew and two great-nephews became Baptist ministers and a niece, two great-nieces and a great-great-niece married Baptist ministers.[39] The nephew, Dr Jervis Holms Coats (1844-1921), who was Storie Street's first organist, ministered at Govan for forty-two years and was twice President of the Scottish Baptist Union.[40] His entry into the stipendiary ministry was a Coats watershed. His initial training had been in banking, which he disliked as a matter of jobs for the boys, but his parents, the W. H. Coatses, 'being old Scotch Baptists, had never favoured professionalism in the Church' and his brother George Holms Coats 'thought him a darned fool, and told

him so'.[41] Nonetheless he studied at Wurzburg and Göttingen as well as Glasgow, and it was he who preached at Coats Memorial's opening and at its memorial service for Oliver Flett, and who conducted its first and third baptismal services. Similarly his son, William Holms Coats (1881-1954; Glasgow, Oxford and Marburg) conducted the funeral service for Flett's successor-but-one, was principal in his turn of the Scottish Baptist College (from 1935) and President of the Scottish Baptist Union (1938-9).[42] He has descendants who are still members of Coats Memorial. By contrast, his cousins, Robert Hay Coats (1873-1956; Glasgow, Oxford, Kiel and Leipzig) had his main pastorate in England, serving for twenty-two years at Hamstead Road, Birmingham, thereafter lecturing extra-murally in Latin and English, author of *Types of English Piety, Traveller's Tales of Scotland*, and *John Galsworthy as a Dramatic Artist*. His official obituary described him as 'one of the last links with the Birmingham of J. H. Jowett, F. L. Wiseman, L. P. Jacks and Bishop Gore.'[43]

That assessment encapsulates a significant cultural development, indeed assimilation, which is reflected in the two ministers who married into the family, Oliver Flett and Walter Mursell. Oliver Flett (d.1894), whose marriage to Mary Wilson Coats divided the hamcurers and contributed to the secessionist temper which had been overboiling for some time,[44] was the outsized character required of every active Victorian church. George Holm Coats, the brother-in-law who had taken his side over the marriage, minced no words about this 'dourest and most pig-headed of men':

> He was a Norseman who had inherited the strong barbaric temper of his race. He was utterly uncompromising in his loves and hates. One was either altogether devil or altogether saint to him . . . yet such was the influence of this extraordinary man that, though he had no charm of manner and little mental refinement, he could by a kind of insidious flattery and almost hypnotic power lead us right in the teeth of the natural flow of our instincts and affections and even control our affections.[45]

This was the man who took Storie Street irrevocably into the Victorian mainstream and eventually into Coats Memorial. When he was appointed in 1860, his stipend was £120. When he died he was reputedly one of the best paid ministers in Paisley. Appointed as Elder Flett, from 1868 he was 'minister', and by January 1881 the 'Rev. O. Flett', and since his Glasgow honorary doctorate came that year he was thereafter 'Dr Flett' to his people and 'the Rev. Oliver Flett D.D.' in correspondence.[46] That personal gentrification - or professionalization - folloowed the secession of 1866 which saw the departure of Storie Street's last unpaid elder, the reduction of its membership from 169 to 80 and, for Flett at least, the lancing of a tiresome boil. What G. H. Coats saw as manipulation and roughness was the obverse side of the pastoral credibility which enabled pastor and people to ride the storm. Flett's theology was held to be 'broad and modern' (and he read his sermons), but he managed to be rugged in the old mould too.[47] His sudden death came on holiday as he pulled a boat up Sannox beach 'after a night of fishing. "Just one heave more", had been his last words, as he dropped down on the shore.'[48]

Flett's successor, after a four-year vacancy, was a development in contrast. Walter Mursell (b.1870) was an Englishman from a famous ministerial family.[49] He was an open communionist who came to Paisley after two short English pastorates. In Paisley he married the daughter of Donald Fraser, the town's leading doctor, whose wife was a sister of Mrs Flett and George Holms Coats. Mursell published collections of talks, verse and essays, and left Paisley in 1921 to lecture at Aberdeen University in Public Reading and Speaking. like Robert Hay Coats in Birmingham, Walter Mursell belonged to the school of literary minister. At Coats Memorial 'his voice and his manner of delivery were as if designed for the building'.[50] No less to the point, they seemed to be designed for that building's people and not just its Coatses.

## IX

So far changes of attitude, each foreshadowed in its context, have merely been charted, with the assumption that they are consonant with their developing contexts. Seceders from the Pen Folk cold not have contemplated Walter Mursell with his robed choir in a building whose scholarly correctness showed more continuity with pre-Reformation Scotland than almost any other built since the Reformation. Yet that was entirely in line with the polity shaped by those seceders and with their independence as well as their consistency of thought. It represented their mentality and their mutuality as refracted through the gifts of an Oliver Flett or the opportunities of Victorian Paisley. Something of this can be seen in three Coatses of the mid and late Victorian generations: Joseph Wilson Coats, the pathologist (1846-1899), whose formation was in Storie Street although his adult Baptist life was with Adelaid Place, Glasgow; his wife, Georgiana Taylor (1852-1927), whose formation and adult Baptist life were with John Street and Adelaide Place but whose grandfather had migrated from Pen Close to Storie Street and thence to George Street;[51] and George Holms Coats, the ham curer. Joseph Coats (Glasgow, Leipzig and Wurzburg), assistant to Lister, runner-up for the Cambridge Chair of Pathology in 1884 and first Professor of Pathology at Glasgow from 1894, was at once the model of a cultivated Scottish medical academic and an active and respected Baptist.[52] The radicalism and integrity of his views fitted the pews of Storie Street and Adelaide Place without difficulty.

He joined Storie Street when he was sixteen, 'led by a general impulse to do what was counted good', and with no 'clear notion of the import of the thing I was doing'.[53] Yet there could be no doubt about the feltness of his maturing faith. In September 1888 he worshipped in Glasgow Cathedral: 'I heard one of those essayish sermons, so common among Established and Free Kirk ministers . . . This seems to me a mere playing on the surface of Scripture - not an exposition but an imposition of sentence on sentence till the original thought is hidden.' Coats wanted 'the very soul of the passage . . . breathed through us by the living words of the preacher'.[54] There certainly breathed the spirit of the Storie Street exhorters. That spirit also lived on in his dislike of gush and his reasonable Puritanism. At Crieff Hydro in 1885 he endured the singing of 'My soul is black and guilty/My heart is dead within':

> I could not rise to pretend singing such a thing . . . Such is evangelical religion . . . a poor business. Isn't it strange that people who sing that, and put something of the same nonsense into their prayers, are the very people who count themselves better than other folks, and who have the real persecuting spirit in them . . .[55]

So with Sunday games: at a hotel an Irishwoman invited Joseph's daughter to join her in a game of 'Halma'. Joseph's reaction was: 'It is not wrong for her, but it would be wrong for you.'[56]

Joseph's spiritual thinking for himself was consistent but undoctrinal:

> Spirit is a mere potentiality; to discharge itself, to do anything, it must have a sphere, it must come down to particulars . . . It cannot express itself but by means of the body. It is not the body, but it cannot think without it . . . it cannot think without a brain - to shape itself into the time-element it needs an organ . . . It may assume other modes of expression [than the body] . . . there are still particulars in the universe besides the earth, and other elements of thinking besides time and space. This seems to me to throw a strong light on the Mission of Christ. God is a spirit, an Infinite Potentiality who can shape Himself into different actualities . . . it is only in . . . His actualities that we can see Him.[57]

Family worship at Coats's house was Bible reading and prayers 'usually from Dr Martineau's Book'.[58] Martineau's spirituality was powerfully attractive but Coats knew the limitations within which it worked. In 1871 he attended a lecture by the Hindu, Chunder Roy: 'I believe that so far as a heathen acts up to his lights he stands on as good a platform as we do, that in him Christ has revealed himself.' The trouble was that Chunder Roy's lights were reflected in an eclecticism 'which can only suit individuals and nations in their highest development and can never be a people's religion'; 'it allies itself . . . to the rationalistic and unitarian phases of Christianity and as a system partakes of their weakness'. And, revealingly, it ignores 'one of the strongest points of the Christian religion, what Carlyle in his wonderful chapter in "Sartor Resartus" on "The Everlasting Yea" has denominated the *Worship of Sorrow*.'[59] With that shadow and that insistence on a true people's religion we return to the Victorian Christian activist set radical in a Baptist mould: 'A Toynbee Hall with a definite recognition of Christianity as its basis . . . ought to be the thing. I wish the young fellows at the College would give themselves to some such work.'[60] That was written to his wife in September 1886. Three years later: 'But here there comes a Christianity on a broader basis - the Christianity of the Sermon on the Mount straight from the source without any device of man . . . I believe, for my part, in this ancient Christianity which Christ himself taught.'[61] And he told the Glasgow University Christian Association: 'You are invited to try and get a living and life-giving connection with Him, and that without any intervention.'[62] Such activism, when turned into a Baptist direction, was firmly put at the opening of Adelaide Place's St Clair Street Mission in November 1891: 'I confess that my chief interest in this meeting lies in the question - "Are we here at

the foundation of a Christian Church?"[63] From this concern flowed his twin concepts of church and conversion. The former he saw as 'a union for mutual help in the Christian life', and he set it provocatively in his context of a people's religion by taking as text the proverb 'Union is Strength' and, as illustration, the Trades Unions: 'have greatly added to the strength of the Working-Class Community, which embodies the bulk of the population and which it is essential should look at things in a systematic way. Women have scarcely begun such Unions, but the sooner they do the better . . .'[64] And the first step to such churchly union must be conversion: save that conversion was not a *step*: 'Conversion is a turning round, a facing about. But a man may face about and yet stand still, or he may even, after facing round, go backwards. It is essential to turn round, but it is no less essential to salvation that we should walk on . . .'[65] That was Coats's consistent message as a Baptist. He told a social meeting at Adelaide Place in 1894: 'in a sense we exist to minimise or diminish the importance of Baptists . . . To us Baptism is merely the external symbol of an internal change. The change must be there before the symbol, or else the latter . . . is an evil.'[66] Here too the spirit of Storie Street spoke clear: 'To us the Church is a Democracy'; to us Baptism is the voluntary act of Christ's free man - 'I claim the right to look into God's word with my own eyes and not through those of priest or minister . . . No one on this earth dare refuse the means by which his own inner convictions can be confirmed and strengthened'.[67] Two years later, this time in a Baptist Missionary Society context, he returned to such themes:

> What was there, then, in the principles of the Baptists which was so fundamental in them as to make them the chosen instruments in this great work? As I take it, the pre-eminent characteristic of our denomination is the direct personal relation between man and his God. There is no man or thing coming between us and them . . . each man stands in his own personal responsibility. The man is ennobled into the position of a child of God . . . Do you see how this makes all men our brethren . . . ?

And then, a shade modified since 1894, the underlining: 'It is said that we are a democratic body. I do not like the word. It means the *Rule* of the people. I have no belief that the people will be good rulers, and I am much more anxious to see the *Brotherhood* of the people.'[68] In the spring of 1888 Adelaide Place was looking for a minister. Its choice, T. H. Martin, was similar to Walter Mursell, Coats Memorial's choice ten years later. Joseph Coats's comments are suggestive:

> *18 April 1888:* I was at a meeting of Pastorate Committee last night. There is every unanimity as regards Mr Martin's preaching, but he does not seem to be much of a pastor. I must say that I believe he would be a great acquisition to the denomination in Scotland. He is a thoughtful, able man, and has, I believe, the root of the matter in him. The meeting was adjourned in order to give Mr Bowser an opportunity of seeing men in London and getting their opinion . . .
>
> *1 May 1888* After dinner I went to a conference between deacons and five others and Mr Martin. He was asked some questions, had the work of the

> Church explained to him. He was perfectly frank - said that he was not a 'tea-totaller' - was an open-membership man - was not to be confined by orthodox formulas, etc. etc.. . . It seems that his preaching on Sunday was very good.
> *16 May 1888* . . . I think he . . . will do very well - a thoughtful, manly style he has, and is not too orthodox.[69]

With all that and English approbation too, it was entirely fitting that when, eleven years later, Joseph Coats died, it should be T. H. Martin and Walter Mursell who conducted the funeral service.[70]

Coats's marriage with Georgiana Taylor (1852-1927) was the sort of Victorian partnership that feminist historians tend to ignore. Her cultured horizons, like her intellect, were broad, but then she was a West India Merchant's daughter as well as the granddaughter of Paisley Pen Folk and a descendant of a witch burned at Renfrew.[71] She was also the wife of a Glasgow professor. Their house in University Gardens was designed by the John Burnet whose firm had competed for Coats Memorial ten years before.[72] Travel, music, the theatre and detective stories were accessible delights, to furnish a mind which in later years admired Lloyd George, approved thoroughly of Maud Royden, was impressed by Birmingham's Bishop Barnes and enthusiastic about the Student Christian Movement.[73] These things were at one with her activism ('Be something; be a Roman Catholic if you like, but be something')[74] and an independence which was determinedly open. Hence her interest in Christian Science's healing methods, 'especially in the emphasis they laid on Bible Study'.[75] If Joseph had frozen at the gush of evangelical hymnody, so too Georgiana 'would stand, in a rare and eloquent silence, resisting even the haunting strain of "Stracathro" while the saints round her sighed for the blessedness they had known. She knew it still, and refused to deny the fact.'[76] The relevance of this is that she was a known and active Baptist woman, busy in the Baptist Women's Auxiliary and on the committee of the Scottish Baptist College which in its earlier days was virtually a Coats preserve. An obituary captured this: 'She seemed to me to have built on the finest things in the Baptist faith . . . wherein the sould answers direct to God and finds therein a practical and experimental spiritualising of all life.'[77]

It was almost like that with George Holms Coats, though at the last it seems to have slipped away, unsustained by the discipline which moulded the faith of his brother and sister-in-law. In 1916 he resigned his membership of Coats Memorial; his active Christian life ceased at that point. The reasons seem not to lie in personality (the proofs of *Rambling Reminiscences* were read by Jervis Holms Coats, his minister brother, and by Walter Mursell, his ex-minister), or politics (his Coatses had an active war), or commercial difficulty (his sixty years with W. and A. Coats were lavishly celebrated in 1919). They lie most likely in belief. The Storie Street independence evident in Joseph ran away with George. On his first visit to the United States, in search of beef buttocks, he relished the fact that he stayed with 'a Unitarian, and a fine old sport'.[78] On his return in 1882 from his second visit his attention was naturally caught by the fellow passenger who turned out to be the 'lady

pastor of a Baptist Church in one of the Southern States', but her preaching was another matter: 'I am sorry to say it was a poor revival kind of sermon'.[79] His recollections of his first school were of its teacher, 'a maiden lady, of uncertain age and blighted hymeneal prospects', and her God, 'the vindictive, jealous monster of the ancient Jews'; and from his last school the best memory was of the master who talked 'with a breadth and culture and courage and freedom from mental restraint very rare in those days'.[80] At the end of his life George Coats urged the Sunday opening (after church hours) of Paisley's Liberal Club, and although that had happened by 1920 it pained him that the museum and art gallery - which were as municipally important as pure art, water and health - remained shut, 'and if good orchestral music is desired on Sunday, one has to go still to Glasgow parks to hear it'.[81]

Those attitudes bubbled from his decades of taking a young men's Bible class. That had convinced him that the religion of Christ had been distorted to 'an incomprehensible body of speculation. The Apostle Paul started the game.' So George dropped all reference to the Trinity ('there is no ethical force today in Trinitarianism as it has been hitherto taught'), to miracles, to the vicarious sacrifice. Certain that all good literature was inspired and that the Bible was a 'somewhat fortuitous and miscellaneous collection of books bound together by priestly and royal authority', he stripped his message to his young men to the 'spirit and character and ethics of the Master' and to the here-and-now possibility of a new heaven and earth on *this* planet. 'Christ thought it would come soon, and gave us the rules of the game, which were simple enough'.[82] Traditional eternity had no charm for him.[83]

## X

Those were suggestive thoughts for any pew but they add particular point to the published lecture which George Holms Coats gave in April 1894 so that Storie Street might be better prepared for its new working memorial. Coats called it *An Ideal Baptist Church*.[84] It contains all the traditional sense, the radicalism, the directness of the Storie Street mentality as distilled through his engaging prejudices. It explains the new Baptist cathedral. Coats lectured at unequal length under seven heads: The Entrance into Church, Prayer, Praise, Giving, Religious Freedom, Baptism and Brotherliness.

*The Entrance into Church* was about the Voluntary: 'the opening part of our Church service is, not the prayer or hymn, but the Voluntary, and . . . every one should be seated before it begins'.[85] *Prayer* is homed in on the new church's kneeling boards: 'In an Ideal Church, the worshippers will not "hunker", but reverently kneel.'[86] *Praise* went to town on the choir. Choristers were truly priests, set apart for the sacrifice of praise. The choirmaster should be 'one who unites the qualities of artist and Christian gentleman', fit for his 'high and holy' office as he applies 'the refining influences of art to the nurture of those emotional feelings which form so important a part of human experience - of brotherly life'.[87] And they should look the part. The new church aimed architecturally at form and colour above all in the chancel, the singing place. There George Coats reached a minefield:

> It seems rather strange that no church would think of interfering with a choir even though the ladies wore the most gaudy and vulgar costumes and the men dressed as lady-killers and sported light kids and diamond rings; and yet, were these ladies and gentlemen to dress in surplices, which are the plainest of all costumes, they would be very apt to interfere . . . [88]

He selected his arguments with care:

> I have been informed that most of the nurses in our Infirmaries - many of whom are ladies by education, and have been brought up in what is called good society - offer no objection to the uniformity of dress which they assume.[89]

Coats got away with it. The choir unanimously agreed to wear surplices and, though the matter came to church meeting, the church decline to interfere. And so to *Giving*. This too must be bound up with active worship:

> Instead of putting one man at the door to watch the plate, I would put several men at each door to watch for the wayfarer, the dissolute, the poor, and the needy, and who would with kindliest tone lead them to the best seats in the house . . . There is special music written for what is called the Offertory. The meaning of an Offertory to Protestants is the Collection, and music is written for it . . . an aid to the devotional act of contributing to the necessitities of the poor . . . [90]

Thus the act of giving in worship would truly become 'a sacrifice - a sacred deal - a sacrament, a sacred act of the mind' and he imagined the plate passing 'from hand to hand like a communion-cup, knitting hearts together in common sacrifice for the well-being of others'.[91]

With *Religious Freedom, Baptism* and *Brotherliness* Coats came to what he and his hearers would have agreed was the heart of the matter. The first three gave him the opportunity to urge his hearers to cast out all fear 'of the discoveries of science, of the anathemas of the orthodox or the tattle of Mrs Grundy':

> As all Baptists ought to know, each of our churches is independent . . . It is rather difficult to make Presbyterians understand that the Baptist Union is not the Baptist Church . . . that whenever an attempt has been made, even by so great a name as that of Spurgeon,[92] to touch the inviolable liberty of each congregation, it has been utterly defeated, so that each Baptist Church has as one of its fundamental principles a constitution within itself embracing all the power which is wielded by Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly: and any one, priest or layman, can, without consulting any man or body of men, start a church tomorrow and call it a Baptist Church. Every individual church enjoys this freedom . . . in accordance with order and decency and the progress of thought and culture.[93]

That was simple. *Baptism* was less so. In the new church baptism was an architectural matter: in modern Presbyterian churches the font was to be found

prominent in front of the chancel; in many modern American Baptist churches the baptistery was 'as prominent and ornamental as the font in other churches'. So now at Paisley, as the Presbyterian church 'has conspicuous the sacramental font, [we] shall have conspicuous the emblematic baptistery'.[94] The stress was on 'emblematic', for Coats had a keen weather eye on current moves within Presbyterianism to assert 'the efficacy of the sacraments' and so, firmly denying that baptism was a *sacrament*[95] and thus enjoyably refuting 'an utterly false dogma of the Roman Church' that Presbyterians and Episcopalians alike had taken on board, he could contrast their 'narrow, meagre view of God's spirit-baptism with that which it shall be the pride and joy of an Ideal Baptist Church to hold aloft'.

> The Church must be satisfied that this great fact had taken place in his being, and then he shall be recognized as a Freeman, the baptismal bath shall be there, so that, if he desire it, he shall be permitted to act in outward symbol, a material representation of the great spiritual change which has taken place within him.[96]

Baptism ended in *Brotherliness*. Here the homely spirit of Coffee Kirk, most vulnerable by its very homeliness to the splendours in store, flooded upon him. Fellowship at the Lord's table greatly worried Coats if it were held to have any sacramental significance. 'In our Ideal Baptist Church some attempt will be made to return to more rational ways. Let us, if necessary, continue the present service . . . In this, as in baptism, there is no mystery, no sacerdotalism. But . . . an Ideal Baptist Church will revert to the primitive form':

> True socialists, communists, were they. And all this was brought about not by any other way than this, by the brethren meeting frequently and enjoying a social, brotherly, holy meal together - by introducing family life into the Church. They were . . . drawn into intense fellowship . . . This is Christ's gospel; this is the business of a Church.[97]

In this at least Coats Memorial might be Storie Street or even Pen Close.

## XI

Did the new building help that business? Did it reflect the totality and intensity of the Paisley Baptist experience? It is on the answers to those questions that the success of this working memorial must be judged.

Certainly here is drama, carefully articulated, larger than life but never frightening and never unreasonable. Thus the Wagnerian stairway rising from the carriage sweep to the suite of front doors disguises a false basement of surprisingly light yet still dramatically Gothic halls and retiring rooms of the sort necessary for the daily activities of such a congregation, reinterpreting the spirit of Storie Street's Coffee Kirk Sundays, with T. G. Abercrombie's quietly stylish but sensible Sunday Schools a street or so away for more strenuous activity.[98] It is an engineering challenge fit for the most up-to-date architect, as the building's careful, complex buttressing amply demonstrates.

So the drama unfolds in successive acts. The Sunday worshipper, expectant

from the challenge of the steps, crosses the vestibule, an intense space, richly confined. Under his feet is the mosaic of the lamb. Above his head are monograms of Thomas Coats's family, in almost the sole recognition of their grand benefaction. So into the main church, the people's space. Here is a place for proclaiming the Word, hence the careful positioning of the pulpit so that the preacher can survey each individual, and he surveyed. Hence the convex metal cap in the pulpit s canopy and the thirty-nine acoustic wires stretched high above the pews across the nave's front three bays. Hence the significance of the glazed screen, excluding all breezes save those of the Spirit. Hence the sermon in alabaster carved on the pulpit or high on the chancel's north wall: Jesus and Paul, John and Isaiah, the woman at the well, and the Good Samaritan, and Christ and the little children, the Adoration of the Magi, the Last Supper. Here too is a room for Protestant drama, symbolic certainly, sacramental perhaps: the table and the open baptistery, the former with a seated Christ carved on its top, the latter in marble with its purpose pointed by the chancel's central carving of Christ's baptism, as might be found in Chartres. It is in alabaster. It is drama which might be oratorio, scored for a cathedral choir, fifty strong. Here the choir, though side-stalled, manages to be congregational too because the organist sits behind what looks like an altar but is in fact the console. Thus he faces choir and congregation, controlling them alike. The only other worshipper placed so strategically is the minister when in the pulpit.

The vestries are reached quickly and easily across the ambulatory behind the chancel. Their grandeur, though faded, is undeniable. The electrolier in one brings out a touch of Mackintosh. There are the remains of stencilling on the walls. The washbasins here too are like fonts. The electric fires are dramatically ineffective. And there is one most important Baptist birch. Two of the rooms are period-pannelled and generously chimney-pieced, meticulously equipped as baptismal changing rooms, for the panelling folds out, rather as in an expensive outfitters.

The total cost has been estimated at £110,000: so much for the competitors' £20,000 or the assessor's £25,000.[99] In this it was certainly a sport among contemporary Baptist churches. Yet it is hard to see how its architect could have been more sensitive, given his brief, to his memorial's working needs.

Twenty-five years on from his lecture and four years out of fellowship, George Holms Coats was no longer so sanguine about the effect on 'a church whose traditions were laid and built up on the basis of congregational liberty and independence'.[100] Nonetheless, Coats Memorial has outlived the firm of Coats, at least in Paisley. By 1985 the firm had moved out of the town abandoning the mills and Ferguslie and retaining a presence only in Anchor Mills, which had belonged to the Clarks, the Coats's great Presbyterian rivals.

## NOTES

59 G. R. Breed, *The Baptist Evangelical Society - An Early Victorian Episode*, Dunstable 1988, p24.

60 J. Springhall, B. Fraser, M. Hoare, *Sure and Stedfast: A History of the Boys' Brigade 1883-1983*, 1983, pp.36, 47, 51, 53.

61 Thus Charlotte Coats, daugher of the 1st Baron Glentanar, of her first marriage to the Hon.

William Walrond MP (d.1915), heir to the Tory 1st Baron Waleran; J. Lees-Milne, *Ancestral Voices*, 1975.

62 J. Lees-Milne, *Caves of Ice*, 1983, p.52.

63 *Jubilee*, p.22.

64 *Rambling Recollections*, p.132.

65 *Jubilee*, pp.23, 42, 45, 142; *Paisley Museum and Art Galleries*, Renfrew District Council Museum and Art Galleries Service, 1985, pp.1-2.

66 A. Coats, *From the Cottage to the Castle*.

67 *ibid.*, pp.36, 39.

68 The former is now in the present writer's possession. For Henry Drummond (1851-97) see *DNB*.

69 *Paisley Museum op.cit.*, pp.17-18; *Jubilee* p.11.

70 *Jubilee*, pp.23, 45, 64, 142, 145.

71 *Rambling Recollections*, p.136.

72 *ibid.*, p.190.

73 *ibid.*, p.188. One of his protégés was the future Liberal MP, D. T. Holmes (1863-1955), grandfather of Tony Benn; Margaret Stansgate, *My Exit Visa*, 1992, p.3.

74 Janet Coats (1844-1918) in 1882 married James Tait Black, *Rambling Recollections*, pp.191-2.

75 For Sir Thomas Glen-Coats Bt (1846-1922), see note 18; also *Jubilee*, p.11, and *passim*.

76 *Jubilee*, pp.86-9.

77 *ibid.*, p.161.

78 *ibid.*, pp.25, 114.

79 *ibid.*, p.170.

80 *ibid.*, p.168. He died, aged 50, in October 1933.

81 Private information.

82 *Rambling Recollections*, p.13.

83 *ibid.*

84 *ibid.*, pp.19-21.

85 *ibid.*, p.129.

86 *ibid.*, p.18.

87 *ibid.*, p.24.

88 *ibid.*, p.25.

89 *ibid.*, p.37.

90 *ibid.*, p.46.

91 *ibid.*, p.135.

92 *ibid.*, p.79.

93 *ibid.*, pp.51-2.

94 *ibid.*, pp.216, 214-5.

95 *ibid.*, pp.17,52.

96 Respectively, Dr Jervis Holms Coats (1844-1921), Dr William Holms Coats (1881-1954), Robert Hay Coats (1873-1956), Mrs Oliver Flett, Mrs Robert Glendinning, Mrs Walter Mursell and Mrs B. Gordon Hastings.

97 *Jubilee*, p.26.

98 *Rambling Recollections*, pp.59-60.

99 *Baptist Handbook* 1955, pp.320-1.

100 *Baptist Handbook* 1957, p.338.

101 *Jubilee* pp.56-8; *Rambling Recollections* pp.78-9.

102 *ibid.*, pp.79-80.

103 *Jubilee* p.49.

104 *Rambling Recollections* p.80.

105 *Jubilee* p.134.

106 He was one of seven Mursells to be Baptist ministers. His grandfather, James Phillippo Mursell (1799-1885) of Leicester, was President of the Baptist Union in 1864; his uncle was James Mursell (1829-75) of Kettering, president of the Northamptonshire Association in 1863; his father, Arthur Mursell (1831-1914) of Manchester, Birmingham and London, moved from noisy Radicalism to noisy Liberal Unionism.

107 *Jubilee* p.83.

108 See note 46. See also *Jubilee*, pp.32, 34, 36-8, 44-5.

109 See [Olive and Victoria Coats] *Dr and Mrs Joseph Coats: A Book of Remembrance*, Glasgow 1929; also *Rambling Recollections*, pp.64-73.

110 *Book of Remembrance*, *op.cit.*, p.6.

111 *ibid.* pp.8-9.

112 *ibid.*, p.232.

113 *ibid.*, p.139.

114 *ibid.*, pp.10-11.

115 *ibid.*, p.139.

116 *ibid.*, pp.23-6.

117 *ibid.*, p.237.

118 *ibid.*, p.245.

119 *ibid.*, 120.

120 *ibid.*, p.71.

121 *ibid.*. pp.71-2.

122 *ibid.*, p.72.

123 *ibid.*, pp.92-3.

124 *ibid.*, pp.94, 96.

125 *ibid.*, pp.100, 101.

126 *ibid.*, pp.240-1, 243, 244.

127 *ibid.*, p.145.
128 *ibid.*, p.235.
129 *ibid.*, p.36.
130 *ibid.*, pp.174, 178, 191, 192, 199.
131 *ibid.*, p.173.
132 *ibid.*, p.191.
133 *ibid.*, p.178.
134 *ibid.*, p.190.
135 *Rambling Recollections*, p.200.
136 *ibid.*, p.208.
137 *ibid.*, pp.248, 254.
138 *ibid.*, pp.266-7.
139 *ibid.*, pp.272-5.
140 *ibid.*, p.273.
141 G. H. Coats, *An Ideal Baptist Church*, *op.cit.*
142 *ibid.*, p.8.
143 *ibid.*, p.9.
144 *ibid.*, p.12.
145 *ibid.*, p.14.
146 *ibid.*
147 *ibid.*, pp.16-17.
148 *ibid.*, p.18.
149 The reference is to the Downgrade Controversy.
150 *Ideal Baptist Church*, pp.21-2.
151 *ibid.*, pp.19-20.
152 *ibid.*, pp.24.
153 *ibid.*, pp.26, 28, 29.
154 *ibid.*, pp.32-3.
155 Abercrombie drew up the plans in 1905. They were built 1909-10 and opened by Winifred Glen-Coats (d.1947); *Jubilee*, pp.85-6.
156 That is the implication of *Rambling Recollections*, p.123.
157 *ibid.*, p.272.

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