

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### **Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology.**

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Edinburgh: T&T Clark; and Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993; xx+906pp. £39.95, \$79.99; ISBN 0 567 0960 6, 0 8308 1407 8.

Until now there has been no systematic effort to chart the rich and varied story of Christianity in Scotland with reasonable comprehension between the covers of one book. The new *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* makes such an attempt and succeeds magnificently. The project, sponsored by Rutherford House, an Edinburgh study-centre organized primarily by Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, has had a long gestation. Despite problems along the way, the lengthy period of preparation was, on balance, a benefit. It made it possible, for example, to receive several articles from F.F. Bruce (1910-90), as well as also to include a summary article on Bruce's life as a Scottish scholar who did more than any other twentieth-century individual to rejuvenate academic study of the Scriptures among Evangelicals. The long wait also had poignant effects. The *Dictionary* contains an article by W.M. Dempster on 'Huts and Canteens' (a Christian service to Scottish troops in World War II), which, because of the delay, could note Dempster's death in 1991 and also comment on his being 'at the heart' of this relief effort.

The wait was worth it. From 'Aberdeen Breviary' to 'Zwinglianism', through each of its 906 pages, the *Dictionary* is a goldmine of both human interest and Christian enlightenment.

Simply as a reference work, it is a model. The organizing and general editors secured just the right authors for the various articles. A total of 382 scholars contributed, ninety-five drawn from outside Scotland, including twenty-six from the United States and seven from Canada. The matching of authors and articles is also superb. Many of the articles are written by individuals who have published substantial research on their assigned themes or persons. Almost always the authors are sympathetic with their subjects. The best examples of this sympathy are the articles on Scottish Roman Catholicism, a subject of great importance for the medieval and early modern times, but also again in the twentieth century since Roman Catholics now make up the largest church-attending denomination in previously Protestant Scotland. Most of the Roman Catholic articles in the *Dictionary* come from Roman Catholic authors. The same procedure was followed for other religious groups like Jews, Unitarians, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses – 'insiders' with special knowledge and sympathy do the writing.

Two mechanical features are especially commendable. The print, though compact in two columns per page, is very clear. In addition, there is an outstanding system of cross-references which makes it a simple matter to leap rapidly throughout the volume in pursuit of connected themes.

In form so also in content: the *Dictionary* is an absolute treasure of information. The main article on missions by Andrew Walls – which includes the development of the missionary spirit in Scotland as well as accounts of Scottish missionaries around the world – is a full-scale monograph in its own right and should be published separately. It is especially informative on the high place that Scottish missionaries have always given to educating Christian leaders. Several other articles, though not quite as magisterial, are splendidly original pieces of creative research and authoritative summary – for example, Donald Meek on revivals, Ian Campbell on religious themes in Scottish literature, Nicholas Needham on sabbatarianism, and Donald Macleod on systematic theology. When John Dempster writes on religious publishing, he specifies why the church historian finds such riches in the Scottish past: ‘It is impossible to over-estimate the influence of the press on the religious life of Scotland... (Since the Reformation), every development in the history of the Scottish church was both shaped and accompanied by a torrent of print.’

Not all the essays are captivating to the last detail, but nearly all are informative. The coverage of Scottish Christian life is nearly comprehensive, with outstanding pieces on (in only a partial list) architecture, the arts, the atonement, Bibles, Calvinism, the Celtic church, Christology, church and state, theological education, evangelicalism, hymns, libraries, marriage, music, periodicals, preaching, Roman Catholicism, sabbatarianism, the philosophy of Scottish Realism, the Westminster Assembly, witchcraft, women in the Presbyterian churches and as missionaries, and worship. In a special category of interest are highly informative essays on Scottish influences in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Wales.

The volume also provides the guidance that outsiders need to fathom the complicated past of the various Presbyterian bodies that have contended against unbelief, and often against each other, in Scotland’s intense Protestant history – from the Kirk (or established Church of Scotland) through Anti-Burgher, Associated, Burgher, Cameronian, Free Presbyterian, New Light, Old Light, Reformed, Relief, Secession, United, United Free, United Secession, and Wee Free (*i.e.* Free Kirk) variations. It is sobering to think that each one of these designations is the product of deeply held convictions and that each arose from an agonizing schism, a joyous reunion, or sometimes both at the same time. Most of these factions also sent their sons and daughters overseas, where immigrants from almost all these groups have been key players in their new regions’ ecclesiastical history.

The *Dictionary* also helps with Scottish usage: for example 'whigs', originally a term of reproach applied to Covenanters and only later broadened out to political movements in England and the United States; 'stickit minister', for someone who leaves the ministry in favour of another occupation (perhaps originally for getting 'stuck' half-way through a trial sermon); and 'lifters', a short-lived secession church in the late eighteenth century which held that ministers should lift the bread and wine from the communion table before the prayer of consecration.

One of the greatest strengths of the *Dictionary* is the multitude of memorable people treated in its pages. In the words of the introduction, 'it is one of the characteristics of the energetic history of the Scottish church that it has spawned so many figures who were neither major nor insignificant.' Of the book's tremendous number of authoritative biographical sketches, some may perhaps be useful only for genealogical or local purposes. But most reveal a person with a larger historical claim. If they were important in Scotland, or important after leaving Scotland, and they had something to do with Christianity, they are here – in all, 18 Campbells, 15 MacDonalds, 14 Stewarts (plus 6 Stuarts), 12 Gordons, 12 Hamiltons, 11 MacLeods, 11 Forbes, 10 MacKays, 9 Erskines, 8 Frasers, three different George Wisharts, and many, many more.

A number of interesting sketches are also included of figures not usually noticed in church history: literary lights like Sir Walter Scott (who depicted both honourable and dishonourable Scottish ministers in his novels and yet who remained reticent about his own religious position), Robert Burns (by no means an unreligious person, but who skewered the foibles of Scottish Calvinism with rapier wit), and George MacDonald (whose unorthodox Congregational beliefs drove him far from the Scotland of his youth even as he continued to employ themes from his own early life in his books); philosophers like David Hume (a sceptic who remained good friends with numerous Presbyterian clergy) and Thomas Reid (the clerical professor of moral philosophy who was Hume's most trenchant contemporary critic); scientists like William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) and James Clerk Maxwell (whose faith shaped the direction of their path-breaking research); and the industrialist Andrew Carnegie (whose family included Unitarians and Swedenborgians but who seemed himself to worship only the dollar).

There is also solid treatment of those who are usually written up in church histories, sometimes with details, however, that will surprise even experts. These better-known figures include, again only as examples, Andrew Melville and Alexander Henderson, second-generation leaders of the Reformation who possessed not quite the fire, but every bit of John Knox's conviction; Samuel Rutherford, Henry Scougal, and Thomas Boston, seventeenth-century theologians whose works are in print to this day as an inspiration to at least some modern believers (Scougal's *Life of God in the Soul of Man* first showed George Whitefield what he called 'true religion'); Thomas Aikenhead, who as a nineteen-year old became in

1697 the last Scot executed for blasphemy; John Erskine and William Robertson, who led, respectively, Evangelicals and Moderates throughout the eighteenth century and who, whimsically, were thrown together as colleague ministers of the historic Old Greyfriars church in Edinburgh; Robert and James Haldane, brothers who were converted amid the turbulence of the French Revolution and then devoted a considerable family fortune to promoting revival and lay theological education beyond the borders of the established Kirk; James Hogg, whose *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) remains one of the most penetrating religious novels ever written; Edward Irving, who in a short life over the first third of the nineteenth-century innovated boldly as a preacher, but also as promoter of premillennialism, biblical inerrance, and a form of charismatic pentecostalism; Patrick Brewster and James Begg, nineteenth-century orthodox ministers who spoke out as lonely voices for the burgeoning masses of Scottish urban poor; David Livingstone, whose African exploits are well chronicled, but whose connection to America – the Livingstones lost a son in the American Civil War – is not; Alexandra Macphail, who became the first woman physician to work as a missionary under a Scottish church and who was a mainstay to both patients and governments in India; James Orr and James Denney, capable theologians at the start of the twentieth-century whose combination of orthodoxy and sensitivity to the modern situation blazed a trail that too few Evangelicals have since followed; and Eric Liddell, who as a Congregationalist missionary in China seems to have been a person of even more humble integrity than portrayed in *Chariots of Fire* and whose influence pointed another son of Scotland, Peter Marshall, toward the ministry and an eventful career in the United States. On such figures, the *Dictionary* could not be more helpful.

In general, the articles are understated, though not colourless. The authors are certainly free enough to let us know what they think, as, for example, in the article on ‘heresy’ where David Wright speaks of the ‘grotesque disproportion’ of the late twentieth-century where ‘a minister or elder is much more likely to be disciplined for re-baptizing than for denying the divinity of Christ’.

Several authors must be mentioned for contributing unusually illuminating work – John Wolffe on issues involving Catholicism and anti-Catholicism, Andrew Walls on many individual missionaries, Henry Sefton on the major theologians and theological issues of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Derek Murray on Scottish Baptists, Lesley Macdonald on women in Scottish church history, David Lachman on Covenanters and Presbyterian conservatives, Paul Helm on philosophers and philosophical schools, John Dempster on many aspects of periodicals and publishing, Nigel Cameron on issues having to do with Scripture and David Bebbington on general evangelical subjects. Donald Meek’s articles on Gaelic and Highland subjects represent a magisterial distillation of research by hundreds of previous scholars. With great success, Meek

shows both how the Highlands were transformed from the least Christian to the most Christian region of Scotland and how the use (or non-use) of Gaelic played a critical role at every juncture of the Highland's often tragic history. Finally, David Wright and Nicholas Needham were the workhorses whose scores of articles covering the length and breadth of Scottish history not only presented authoritative interpretations but seemed to cover almost all possible holes.

Is the *Dictionary*, then, perfect? Not quite. Experts may find more about which to object, but I discovered only three matters for complaint. One was a typo: the dates provided for James Morison, who championed Charles Finney's theology in Scotland, are 1816-63, but the article has him retiring in 1884. There is also at least one factual error: of James M'Cosh it is said that he was 'almost a lone voice among orthodox Evangelicals' in aligning orthodox faith with evolutionary theory at the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, James Orr, B.B. Warfield, and several contemporary Reformed theologians in the Netherlands made similar adjustments. Finally, I thought the *Dictionary* neglected one topic. Despite perceptive material at several points, especially in articles by William Storrar on Scotland itself and the Church of Scotland's Church and Nation Committee, the question of Scottish nationalism and the churches' part in the intermittent (and now quite insistent) appeal for some form of devolution from Westminster never received full treatment.

As indispensable as the *Dictionary* immediately becomes for the facts of an important sector of church history, it also offers enough general illumination to make many of its pages well worth reading even by those with little interest in Scotland as such.

From the mid-sixteenth century to the early twentieth-century a conservative Protestant church (or set of closely related churches) exerted a most unusual sway over the Scottish corner of the world. That experience constitutes a ready-made laboratory for others who would also bring all of life under the rule of Christ. Surveying that history, one can only conclude that it offers a noble spectacle of solid Christian institutions, dedicated Christian leaders, courageous Christian martyrs, remarkably successful Christian education (in family and society more generally), and a genuinely Christian civilization. What might be called 'Presbyterian Scotland', in other words, presents an enthralling picture of what a religion that tries to keep God at the centre can do to reform lives and shape society.

At the same time, the same history reveals also the limits of even the most dedicated, earnest and courageous Christian efforts. The Scottish Christians who accomplished such heroic deeds were creatures of clay like the rest of us. They were given to theological overkill and never bypassed an opportunity to pursue deviance (real or imagined) through the labyrinthine ways of Presbyterian polity. They exhibited the highest standards of godly thrift and earnest Christian frugality, but were conquered, in the end, by forces from the very industriousness and

mercantile integrity that their religion promoted. T.C. Smout, the greatest living Scottish historian, begins one of his best books, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* with a damning indictment of the weaknesses of a very strong church: 'The age of great industrial triumph was an age of appalling social deprivation, not, certainly, without amelioration, but with no solution for its terrible problems. I am astounded by the tolerance, in a country boasting of its high moral standard and basking in the spiritual leadership of a Thomas Chalmers, of unspeakable urban squalour, compounded of drink abuse, bad housing, low wages, long hours and sham education.... What was the point of all those triumphs of the great Victorian age of industry, if so many people were so unspeakably oppressed by its operations?'

There is also a final, sobering conclusion to be drawn at the end of the twentieth-century. Despite its glorious history, the church age in Scotland has passed away. The great experiment in Christian civilization-building has, for all its triumphs over such a long period, now nearly collapsed. Triumphs and failures alike, in sum, provide a thought-provoking picture of the potential, but also the perils, in attempting to structure a whole society for God.

On a more personal level, that same history offers countless lessons for edification, some to imitate and some to avoid. It shows, for example, the pathetic character of self-protective pettiness (as when the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1799 effectively barred ministers not of the Church of Scotland from its pulpits in large part because the evangelical Anglican Charles Simeon had been spending his vacation preaching to Church of Scotland congregations). But it also reveals the heroism of principle (as when religious broadcaster Ronald Falconer in 1962 refused a high post with the Scottish BBC because he thought his ordination vows prohibited such service). Sometimes it shows how pettiness and principle can exist together (as when in 1988 the Free Presbyterian Church, a conservative Presbyterian splinter that maintains the doctrines of the Reformation with vigorous integrity, disciplined its most illustrious member, Lord MacKay of Clashfern, the Lord Chancellor, because MacKay attended a requiem mass for a deceased legal colleague). Scotland's Presbyterian history shows how easily Protestants fall into the hagiography for which they criticise Roman Catholics (as when an editor was relieved of his post in the mid-nineteenth century for allowing criticism of Thomas Chalmers to appear in his journal). It also provides luminous incidents of winsome Christian love, as when two of the greatest promoters of the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century, Lady Glenorchy and Lady Maxwell, maintained a friendship despite serious differences over the age's great leaders and doctrines (Lady Maxwell thought highly of Wesley, Lady Glenorchy did not).

The same history also contains moments of supernal courage, none more moving than at the death of the Covenanter martyr, eighteen-year-old Margaret Wilson, in 1685. When she was sentenced to death by

drowning with an old widow, Margaret Lauchlison, for refusing to swear an oath to the king, the two were tied to posts on the shore. Margaret Wilson was placed closer to land so that as the tide advanced and she saw the waters overcoming Margaret Lauchlison she might (so the authorities hoped), recant and take the oath. But as the sea swept over Lauchlison, Wilson only waited patiently and said, 'What do I see but Christ wrestling there?'

The history of the Scottish church also offers rare glimpses of Christian charity combined with commitment to the truth. When Edward Irving died in 1834, the young Robert Murray M'Cheyne, himself near the end of a short but eventful life, commented from the heights of orthodoxy, but also out of the charity with which some of the orthodox were imbued: 'I look back upon him with awe, as on the saints and martyrs of old. A holy man in spite of all his delusions and errors. He is now with his God and Saviour, whom he wronged so much, yet, I am persuaded, loved so sincerely.'

For these reasons and more, the *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, even at £39.95 or \$79.99, is the book bargain of the year.

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