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## Short Note: Mistress Rutherford and Ulster in the Summer of 1634

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The spiritual experiences of “Mistress Rutherford” were first published in the *Miscellany XIII* of the Scottish History Society in 2004.<sup>1</sup> The exact identity of “Mistress Rutherford” is not known, but she was a niece by marriage to John Muir, laird of Anniston. She was born at the beginning of the seventeenth century, lost her mother at the age of four and her father at the age of nine, and was then brought up by relatives. At the age of fourteen she was sent to Bethia Aird’s school for girls in Edinburgh. Bethia Aird was the daughter of William Aird, who had been minister of St Cuthbert’s in Edinburgh. Her brother John Aird was minister of Newbattle and she was one of Samuel Rutherford’s correspondents. The young “Mistress Rutherford” was thus brought into the heart of Presbyterian religious society in Edinburgh at a critical time when James VI was bent on conforming the Scottish Church to the practices of the Church of England. She was present, for instance, at the communion in the West Kirk, Edinburgh, on Sabbath 7th March 1619 when the minister Richard Dickson administered the Lord’s Supper to sitting communicants, after the Presbyterian manner; for which he was deprived and imprisoned in Dumbarton Castle.<sup>2</sup>

Mistress Rutherford’s account of her life was written at an unspecified time after the events. She begins at the age of ten and goes through her schooling in Edinburgh, her marriage, her settling in Ulster

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<sup>1</sup> D. G. Mullan (ed.), “Mistress Rutherford’s Conversion Narrative”, *Scottish History Society, Miscellany XIII* (Scottish History Society, Edinburgh, 2004), pp. 146-88.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 169.

with her husband, the death of her husband, and the birth and death of her son. The account ends abruptly when she is aged about thirty. It is highly personal, with only incidental references to other people.

The published version has been carefully edited by Professor David G. Mullan of Cape Breton University. Mullan identifies most of the people referred to and provides numerous pertinent quotations from contemporary writers such as John Welsh and David Calderwood. Unfortunately, he approaches Mistress Rutherford's spiritual experiences from a secular, psychological point of view which limits the value of his comments.

A couple of Mullan's footnotes seem dubious. On one occasion, for instance, Mistress Rutherford says, "So howbeit I had received the sentence of reprobation in myself, ther was hope of mercy". Mullan comments that "she misunderstood the doctrine that she heard: a decree of reprobation is ineluctable". It seems more likely that she was using the word "reprobation" in the sense of "present condemnation or rejection". The Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation is not, after all, difficult to understand.<sup>3</sup> On another occasion she was overwhelmed with such a sense of God's presence that her "narrow heart cried, Lord Hadd". Mullan suggests that "Lord Hadd" might be a variant of "El Shaddai". Perhaps a more likely suggestion is that she was crying, "Lord, hald or haud [i.e. hold]", or something along these lines.<sup>4</sup> It is a pity, too, that Mullan's footnote on Rachel Arnot gives a scurrilous extract from the Episcopalian satirist John Corbet but omits the more edifying and relevant things that might have been said about her.<sup>5</sup>

The main purpose of this note, however, is to draw attention to Mistress Rutherford's time in Ulster. The only event in her account which Mullan is able to date with certainty is the West Kirk communion of 7th March 1619. We would suggest, however, that there is another date, while she was in Ulster, which can be fixed with a degree of confidence; and if it is this so, it sheds a ray of light on an interesting episode of Presbyterian history.

On two occasions during her time in Ulster she refers to "the liberty",<sup>6</sup> and we strongly suspect that this "liberty" was the permission

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 183-4.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 164; see D. C. Macnicol, *Master Robert Bruce* (Edinburgh, 1907), pp. 142-4.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 182, 184.

granted by Bishop Echlin of Down in May 1634 to George Dunbar, Robert Blair, Josiah Welsh, and John Livingstone to resume the work of ministry for six months. Robert Blair had been minister of Bangor since 1623, Josiah Welsh minister of Templepatrick since about 1626, George Dunbar minister of Larne since 1627, and John Livingstone minister of Killinchy since 1630. In May 1632, the four of them were deposed from the ministry by Bishop Echlin, but at the instigation of Sir Andrew Stewart, afterwards Lord Castlestewart, they were unexpectedly restored for six months in May 1634.<sup>7</sup>

Mistress Rutherford had gone to Ireland at an unspecified date, but perhaps about 1632 or 1633. "After some stay in that country," she says, "I grew deader and had severall doubts but did not question the minister. At the communion of Dunagor<sup>8</sup> I was refreshed but my bonds not fully loosed (it was about Candlemass) till the liberty of the gospel." Candlemas was 2nd February, and the "liberty of the gospel", we are suggesting, was the liberty given to Dunbar and others in May 1634. She continues: "At a Friday meeting at Antrim the Lord made Mr Welsh clear many doubts to me concerning my case in dealing for the gospell, quhich eased me." The Friday meeting at Antrim was held monthly and is here described by John Livingstone:

Most of all these [ministers] used ordinarily to meet the first Fryday of every moneth at Antrum, where was an great and good congregation, and that day was spent in fasting, and prayer, and publick preaching. Commonly two preached before noon, and two afternoon. We used to come together on the Thursday night before, and stayed the Fryday night after, and consult about such things as concerned the carrying on the work of God, and these meetings among ourselves were sometimes as profitable as either presbyteries or synods . . . frequently the Sabbath after the Fryday's meeting the communion was celebrated in one or other of these paroches.<sup>9</sup>

Blair describes the delight when the four deposed ministers preached at the Antrim meeting after their restoration: "What joy there

<sup>7</sup> Blair and Livingstone were deposed on 4th May 1632 and Dunbar and Welsh on 12th May 1632, see W. K. Tweedie, "Life of Mr John Livingstone", *Select Biographies Vol. 1* (Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1845), p. 146; Thomas M'Creie (ed.), *Life of Robert Blair* (Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1848), pp. 91, 100.

<sup>8</sup> Donegore, where Andrew Stewart had been minister since about 1627.

<sup>9</sup> Livingstone, p. 143.

was when the four silenced ministers preached together at the monthly meeting, can hardly be expressed.”<sup>10</sup> This seems to have been the occasion that Mistress Rutherford was speaking of, and probably the date was 6th June 1634 which was the first Friday of June. If so, then Josiah Welsh had only seventeen days left to live. He died on Monday 23rd June and among his final words were “Victory! Victory! Victory for evermore!”<sup>11</sup>

From Antrim, Mistress Rutherford went to the Larne communion: “Then I went to the communion at Lorn and had a mixed day with much combat. On Monday Mr Blair preached on 68 Ps, Let God arise. I was bettered by it but my bonds not fully loosed till blessed Cunningham’s communion, a sweet and comfortable day.”<sup>12</sup> Robert Cunningham, here, was the minister of Holywood. From Holywood, she went on to “blessed Blair’s communion” at Bangor where again she had “sore combat . . . till a little before [she] went to the table”. The next Sabbath, there was a second communion in Bangor, where she and her husband had a very “sweet time”. Shortly after this her husband was taken ill. During his sickness she attended “the first communion day of Kilkenny [presumably Killinchy] after the liberty”. This would have been the first communion in John Livingstone’s congregation since he was restored to the ministry. Soon after this her husband died. Then she attended a third communion at Bangor, but she was not able to spend time praying in the fields as she would have liked because she was “weak and near [her] time”. A child, a boy, was duly born and baptized, and she then attended the Mosraigne [presumably Massereene, i.e. Antrim] communion. After this she went to another Holywood communion where she particularly enjoyed the Monday, “a brave day”. Soon after this her son died, and her account then comes to an end. To conclude the story of 1634, the eminent Presbyterian minister, Andrew Stewart of Donegore, died in September of that year, having been unwell since Josiah Welsh’s death, and Blair and Dunbar were re-deposed by Bishop Echlin before the end of November.

The interest in this identification, if correct, is twofold. First, it provides a more detailed account of how the Presbyterian ministers used their six months’ liberty than has previously been available. Blair

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<sup>10</sup> Blair, p. 101.

<sup>11</sup> Livingstone, p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> Mullan, pp. 182-3.

simply states that “the six months granted to us were, through God’s blessing, well improven, and the people made more progress in the ways of God than ever before”. Livingstone mentions only the death of Josiah Welsh.<sup>13</sup> Mistress Rutherford’s account, however, shows that the ministers spent their six months holding a succession of communion seasons.

Secondly, this identification tends to confirm that the Ulster revival, which had been in progress since about 1623, was still continuing. In 1624 Blair and Cunningham had agreed to have four communions each in their congregations, but by the time that Livingstone arrived in 1630 the nine or ten Presbyterian congregations each had two communion seasons a year, arranged not to clash with each other. These communion seasons involved services on Saturday, Sabbath, and Monday and were eagerly attended.<sup>14</sup> In a letter of October 1632, Josiah Welsh mentions over fourteen hundred people being present at a recent occasion.<sup>15</sup> Mistress Rutherford’s account is entirely consistent with this. She mentions seven communion seasons that she attended during the summer of 1634, and during that time she had a confinement and two bereavements so it is not likely that she was present on every possible occasion. Probably the Templepatrick and Donegore communions were discontinued after the sickness and death of their ministers, and perhaps the third Bangor communion was arranged to make up for these. But if Mistress Rutherford was in any way typical, the appetite for communion seasons had, at that stage, in no wise abated.

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<sup>13</sup> Blair, p. 101; Livingstone, pp. 149-50.

<sup>14</sup> Blair, p. 64; Livingstone, pp. 143-4.

<sup>15</sup> W. Fraser, *Memorials of the Montgomeries, Earls of Eglinton* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1859), Vol. 1, p. 224; quoted Mullan, p. 169.



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